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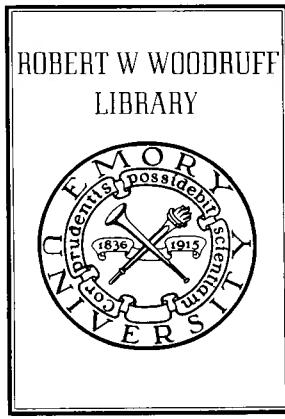
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M I R K A B B E Y.

CHAPTER I.

IN MY LADY'S CHAMBER.

Tis an hour short of midnight, and the depth of winter. The morrow is Christmas Day. Mirk Abbey bears snow everywhere; inches thick upon its huge broad coping-stones; much even on its sloping roof, save on the side where the north wind makes fitful rushes, and, wolf-like, tears and worries the white fleeces. Mirk woods sway mournfully their naked arms, and grind and moan without; the ivy taps unceasingly against the pane, as though entreating shelter. The whole earth lies cold and dead beneath its snow-shroud, and yet the snow falls and falls, flake by flake, soft and noiseless in its white malice, like a woman's hate upon her rival.

It hides the stars, it dims the moon, it dulls the murmur of the river to which the park slopes down, and whose voice the frost has striven in vain to hush these three weeks. Only the Christmas-bells are heard, now faint, now full—that sound more laden with divine regret than

any other that falls on human ear. Like one who, spurring from the battle-field, proclaims, “The fight is ours, but our great chief is slain!” there is sorrow in that message of good tidings; and not only for pious Christian folk; in every bosom it stirs some sleeping memory, and reminds it of the days that are no more. No wonder, then, that such music should touch my lady’s heart—the widowed mistress of Mirk Abbey. Those Christmas-bells which are also wedding-bells, remind her doubtless of the hour when Sir Robert lifted her lace-veil aside, and kissed her brow before all the people in the little church by the sea, and called her for the first time his wife. He will never do so more. He has been dead for years. But what of that? Our dead are with us still. Our acts, our dealings with the world, form but a portion of our lives; our thoughts still dwell with those dear ones who have gone home before us, and in our dreams they still are our companions. My lady is not alone in her private chamber, although no human being is there besides herself. Her eyes are fixed upon the fire, and in its flame she sees a once-loved face invisible to others, whose smile has power to move her even to tears. How foolish are those who ascribe romance to Youth alone—to Youth, that has scarcely learned to love, far less to lose! My lady is five-and-forty at the least, although still comely; and yet there are memories at work within that broad white brow, which, for interest and pathos, outweigh the fancies of a score of girls. Even so far as we—the world—are acquainted with her past, it is a strange one, and may well give her that thoughtful air.

Lady Lisgard, of Mirk Abbey, has looked at life from a far other station than that which she now occupies. When a man of fortune does not materially increase his property by marriage, we call the lady of his choice, although she may have a few thousand pounds of her own, “a girl without a sixpence.” But Sir Robert Lisgard did literally make a match of this impecunious sort. Moreover, he married a very “unsuitable young person;” by which ex-

pression you will understand that he was blamed, not for choosing a bride very much junior to himself, but for not selecting her from the proper circles. When accidentally interrogated by blundering folks respecting her ancestry, the baronet used good-humouredly to remark, that his wife was the daughter of Neptune and Thetis. When asked for her maiden name, he would reply drily : "She was a Miss Anna Dymene ;" for the simple fact was, that she had been thrown up almost at his feet by the sea—the sole survivor of a crowded emigrant-ship that went to pieces before his eyes while he was staying one stormy autumn at a sea-side village in the south. Lashed to a spar, the poor soul came ashore one terrible night in a very insufficient costume, so as to excite the liveliest compassion in all beholders. There was a subscription got up among some visitors of fashion to supply her with a wardrobe ; and they do say that Sir Robert Lisgard's name is still to be seen set down with the rest of the benevolent donors, for five pounds, in the list that is kept among the archives of the village post-office.

But it was not until three years afterwards that he bought her a *trousseau*, for the baronet, intending to make her his wife not only in name—a companion for life, and not a plaything, which is prized so long as it is new, and no longer—caused Lucy Gavestone, during the greater part of that interval, to be educated for her future position. If it was madness in him, as many averred, to marry so far beneath him, there was much method in his madness. Not ashamed of her as a bride, he was resolved not to be ashamed of her as the mistress of his house, or as the mother of his children, if it should please Heaven to grant him issue. It was in France, folks said, that her ladyship acquired those manners which subsequently so excited the envy of the Midland county in which she lived. She bore the burden of the honours unto which she was not born as gracefully as the white rose in her blue-black hair. But to perform her loving duties as a mother, in the way even her enemies admitted

that she did perform them, could scarcely have been learned in France. Only love and natural good sense could have taught her those. Never once had Sir Robert Lisgard cause to regret the gift which the sea had given him. He used, however, smilingly to remark, in his later years—and his words were not without their pathos then—that he wished that he could have married his Lucy earlier, and while he was yet a young man ; but in that case she would have been fitter for the font than the altar, inasmuch as there was a quarter of a century between their respective ages. He always averred that five-and-twenty years of his manhood had been thrown away.

But good wife and matron as Lady Lisgard had been, she was no less excellent a widow and mother. If Sir Robert could have risen from that grave in Mirk church-yard, where he had preferred to lie, rather than in the family vault, so that she might come to visit him in his lonely sleep, and daily lay a flower or two, culled with her own hands, upon him—not perhaps unconscious of that loving service—he would have found all things at the Abbey as he would have wished them to be during life : that is, so far as she could keep them so. Sir Richard, their eldest son, was within a few months of his majority, and, of course, had become in a great degree his own master ; not that he misused his years so as to place himself in opposition to his mother, for he was a gentleman above everything ; but he was of a disposition more haughty and stern than her kindly nature could well cope with, and she nervously shrank from any contest with it, although, on a question of principle—which, however, had not occurred—she might have braved even him.

Walter Lisgard, the younger son, was as genial and good-humoured as his father before him, and although (in common with every one who knew her) I loved and respected my lady, it must be confessed that he was too openly his mother's favourite, as he was the favourite of all at Mirk, in the Abbey or out of it.

Lastly, there was Letty Lisgard—but she shall speak for her sweet self. While her mother sits and thinks before her fire, there is a knock at the chamber-door, and on the instant the picture in her brain dissolves, which was affecting her so deeply, and she has no eyes save for her only daughter. A girl of seventeen enters the room, not gaily, as would have become her age, but with a certain gentle gravity that becomes her at least as well, since it is impossible to imagine that she could look more lovely. Fair as a lily, but not pale, for her usually delicate colour is heightened by some mental emotion, which causes, too, the little diamond cross upon her bosom to rise and fall, and the hazel eyes to melt and glitter beneath their dark lashes ; lithe and a tall as a sapling wooed too roughly by the north wind, she glides in, with her fair head slightly bowed, and casting herself upon her knees beside my lady, exclaims—“Ah, do not weep, dear mother—do not weep !” at the same time herself bursting into a passion of tears. “I knew what you would be thinking of,” continues she, “upon this sad night, and therefore I came to comfort you a little, if I could. If not a merry Christmas, let me at least wish you a happy one, my own dear mother. I am sure that if dear papa can see us now, he wishes you the same.”

“Yes, dearest Letty, that is true. How thoughtful and kind it was of you to leave your friend—breaking off, no doubt, some pleasant chat over school-days —”

“Nay, mother,” interrupted the girl ; “what is Rose to me in comparison with you ? Was it likely that I should forget this anniversary of our common loss !”

Lady Lisgard did not answer in words, but shedding by the wealth of golden brown hair that had fallen over her daughter’s forehead, she kissed that pure brow tenderly. Upon her own cheeks, a crimson flush, called thither by the young girl’s words, was lingering yet. Reader, happy are you if you have never known a loving voice say : “What are you thinking of, dearest ?” expecting to receive the answer : “Of you,” when you have no such

reply to give—when your mind has been wandering far from that trustful being, and perhaps even whither it should not have wandered. Such a flush may then have visited your cheeks, as now touched those of Lady Lisgard, although it is certain that memory never played *her* so false as to remind her of aught whereof she need have been ashamed. The fact was, she had not been thinking of Sir Robert at all, albeit it was upon that very day, five years back, that she had received from his failing hand its last loving pressure, and in that very room. Human nature cannot be trained like those wondrous mechanical inventions of the monks, that indicated the fasts and festivals of the Church so accurately—to suffer or rejoice at particular times and seasons ; we are often sad when the jest is upon our lips, and bear a light heart beneath the sackcloth. Lady Lisgard's thoughts had, Heaven knew, been far from merry ones ; but because she had not been mourning with chronological propriety, her woman's heart unjustly smote her with a sense of want of fealty to the memory of him for whom she still wore—and intended to wear to her dying day—the visible tokens of regret.

It is the fashion to jeer at widows ; but to a reverent mind, there are few things more touching than that frequent sight in honest England—a widowed mother, whose only joy seems to be in what remains to her of her dead lover, husband, counsellor—his children ; and the only grief that has power to wring whose heart, past sense of common pain through the dread anguish that it has once undergone, arises from their misfortunes and misdoings. Ah, selfish boy, beware how you still further burden that sorrow-laden soul !—ah, thoughtless girl, exchange not that faithful breast too hastily for one that may spurn your head in the hour of need !

My lady—for that was what we always called her about Mirk—was neither more nor less fortunate with her children than most mothers. They all three loved her ; but they did not all love one another. Between Sir Richard and Walter was only a year of time, but upon

it had arisen a thousand quarrels. The former thought that the privilege of an elder brother was a divine right, extending over every circumstance of fraternal life ; the latter conceived it to be an immoral institution, borrowed in an evil hour from the Jews, and one to be strictly kept within its peculiar limits—themselves more than sufficiently comprehensive—the inheritance of the family title, and the succession to the landed estates.

“Where are Richard and Walter, Letty ?” asked Lady Lisgard, breaking a long silence. “They, too, have been always mindful, like yourself, of this sad day.”

“They are mindful still, dear mother. I hear Walter’s foot in the corridor even now.”

A swift elastic footfall it was, such as is very suggestive of the impulsive nature of him who uses it ; for a phlegmatic man may move swiftly on rare occasions—such as bayonets behind him, or a mad bull—but there will be no more elasticity in his gait, even then, than in that of a walking-doll ; whereas every step of Captain Walter Lisgard had a double action, a rise and fall in it, independent of the progressive motion altogether.

He was of a slim, yet not delicate build ; his every movement (and, as I have said, there was plenty of it) had a native grace like that of a child ; childlike and trustful, too, were those blue eyes ; soft in their expression as his sister’s, while he stooped down to kiss his mother’s cheek, scarce more smooth than his own. Upon his lip, however, was a fairy moustache, which being, fortunately, coal-black like his somewhat close-cropped hair, made itself apparent to all beholders, and rescued his comeliness from downright effeminacy. But no woman ever owned a softer voice, or could freight it with deeper feeling than Walter Lisgard.

“God bless you, dearest mother, and give you all the good you deserve !” murmured he tenderly.

“And God bless *you*, my darling !” answered Lady Lisgard, holding him at the full distance of her white and rounded arms, clasped with two costly jewels, which

had a worth, however, in her eyes far beyond their price, being Sir Robert's wedding-gift. "Ah, me ! how you remind me of your father's picture, Watty, taken on the day when he came of age. I trust you will grow up to be like him in other respects, dear boy."

"I hope so, mother ; although," added he, with a sudden petulance, "there will be a vast difference between us in some things, you know. He was an only son, whereas I am not even an eldest one ; and when *I* come of age, there will be no picture taken, nor any fuss made, such as is to happen in June, I hear, upon Richard's majority."

"Walter, Walter!" exclaimed Lady Lisgard reprovingly — "this is not like yourself, for it's envious—and—and covetous ! ——"

"At all events, it is very foolish, mother," interrupted the young man drily ; "for what can't be cured must be endured."

"And very, very cruel to me, added" Lady Lisgard.

"Then I am sincerely sorry I spoke," returned Walter hastily, the moodiness upon his features chased away at once by loving regret. "Only, when a fellow leaves his regiment to spend Christmas Eve at home—as I am sure I was delighted to do, so far as you and Letty were concerned — he does not want to find there another commanding officer, uncommissioned and self appointed

"Walter, Walter ! this is very sad," broke in Lady Lisgard piteously : "you know what is Richard's manner, and how much less kind it is than his true meaning. Can you not make some allowance for your own brother ? "

"That's exactly what I said to *him*, mother," answered Walter, laughing bitterly. "Here have I just got my troop, with no more to keep myself on than when I was a cornet, and had no back debts to speak of; and yet, so far from helping me a little, as Richard might easily do, by making some allowance for his own brother, he com-

plains of that which you are so good as to let me have out of your own income. Why, that's not *his* business, if it were twice as much—although, I am sure, dear mother, you are liberality itself. Has he not got enough of his own—and of what should be mine and Letty's here, by rights—without grudging me your benevolences? Is he not Sir Richard Lisgard of Mirk Abbey?——”

“I will not listen to this, Walter,” cried his mother sternly. “This is mere mean jealousy of your elder brother.”

“Oh, dear no, mother; indeed, it is not that,” answered the young man coldly. “I envy him nothing. I hold him superior to me in no respect whatever; and that is exactly why I will not submit to his dictation. Here he comes stalking along the gallery, as though conscious that every foot of oak belongs to him, and every picture on the wall.”

It was undoubtedly a firm determined step enough—unusually so, for one so young as Sir Richard. The face of the new-comer, too, was stern almost to harshness; and as he entered the room, and beheld Walter standing by his mother's side, his features seemed to stiffen into stone. A fine face, too; more aristocratic if not so winning as his younger brother's, and not without considerable sagacity: if his manner was not graceful, it had a high chivalric air about it which befitted his haughty person very well. When he taught himself submission (a rare lesson with him), as now, while he raised his mother's fingers to his lips, and kissed them with dutiful devotion, it would have been hard to find a man with a more noble presence than Richard Lisgard.

“A merry Christmas and a happy New Year to you, mother.” The words, though conventional, had an earnest kindness, which came from the heart. Lady Lisgard kissed him fondly.

“Thank you, dear Richard,” said she; “but, alas! no

Christmas can be a merry one, no year a happy one, when I see my children disagree."

"Ah, Master Walter has been here before me, I see," quoth Sir Richard bitterly, "stealing, like Jacob, his mother's blessing from her first-born, and giving his own account of matters. But please now to listen to *my* version."

"Not to-night, Richard," exclaimed Lady Lisgard with deep emotion. "Let not to-night, sacred to the memory of your common father, be a witness to your mutual accusations. In this room, almost at this very hour, but a few years back, he died, bequeathing you with his last breath to my tenderest care. Here it was that you kissed his white lips, weary with prayers for your future welfare; here it was that you promised, in return, to be good and dutiful sons. I know—I think, at least—that you both love your mother. No, I will kiss neither of you while thus unreconciled. That was not all that he required of you; he would have bidden you, could he have looked forward to this evil time, to love one another also; and oh, Richard! oh, Walter! hark to those bells, that seem to strive to beat their message into the most stubborn ears. Do you not hear what they say?—Letty, dear, do you tell them, then, for there are no lips better suited to deliver it."

The young girl lifted up her head from her mother's lap, to gaze into her eyes; then, with exquisite pathos and softness, repeated, like a silver peal of bells: "Peace and good-will, peace and good-will, peace and good-will to all mankind."

Sir Richard looked at his brother fixedly, but no longer in wrath. "It is my part to make the first advance," said he, "although I was not the first to quarrel;" and he frankly stretched forth his hand.

The other paused a second; then reading on his mother's anxious lips: "For *my* sake, Walter," he grasped his brother's fingers. There was grace in the very delay, as in the motion tenderness and genial

ease, but scarcely the warmth of reconciliation. It was more like the action of a woman who wishes to please; and if you had seen the small hand apart from its owner, as it lay with its one glittering ring half hid in the other's huge white palm, you would have said it was a woman's hand.





CHAPTER II.

THE WAITS.

NCe more my lady is alone, except for her companion-thoughts, which are, however, no longer of a distressing nature. The reconciliation of her boys has gladdened her to the core : she thinks, she trusts at least, that the truce will be a lasting peace. As for Letty, she is all that a mother's heart could wish her to be. If much is lost to my lady, surely much remains. With the poor, one misery is removed only to bring another into greater prominence ; but with the rich, this is not so. Only let the disease be cured, or the quarrel be made up, which is at present vexing them, and all, for a time at least, is sunshine. Even not to be cold, not to be hungry, is something ; and not to have to take thought of the morrow is a great deal. From her warm and curtained chamber, Lady Lisgard looks forth into the night. The snow falls as fast as ever, now straight, now aslant, now whirled in circular eddies by the bitter north. Through its thick and shifting veil, she can scarcely see the old church-tower of Mirk, though it stands close by within the very garden-grounds of the Abbey ; nor the windmill which crowns Mirkland Hill, and on moonlit nights stands up so clear against the sky, a beacon to all the country round. It was weather which those who are armed against it call "Seasonable ;" and some of the

tender sex, who have a fire lit in their rooms before they rise, and go out in seal-skin and travel with foot-warmers, even go so far as to call "Delightful." At all events, it is such as is pleasant to watch from within for a few moments, and then to return to one's fireside with enhanced satisfaction.

There are merry-makers in the kitchen to-night, as befits the season, and my lady's maid has been enjoined not to hurry herself. Her mistress is beginning to unrobe, without her assistance, but very leisurely. She unclasps one warm and sparkling jewel from her arm, and gazes thoughtfully, but far from sadly, upon the picture that is hid within it. It is the miniature of a handsome man past middle age, attired in a blue coat and gold buttons ; what persons of my lady's age would call a decidedly old-fashioned portrait ; but it is the likeness of Sir Robert as her bridegroom. "What a good, kind husband he was," thinks she. "How he loved me, and loaded me with favours ; how much he overlooked, how much he forgot — of which others know nothing—for my sake. How terrible would it be to feel that one had not done one's poor duty in return for so much love. Thank Heaven, I feel free from any such charge. If I had not love—that is, first love—to give him in exchange, I gave him all I had. I gave him genuine affection, esteem—worship. Everybody knows that ; and what is better, my own heart knows it. It never beat with truer fealty towards him than it beats to-night. God knows. I live for his children only. What a fine noble boy is Richard grown ; surely, to look upon him, and to say to one's self : 'This is my son,' should be happiness enough for any mother. True, he is proud ; but has he not something to be proud of? He, Sir Richard, and one of those Lisgards who have ruled at Mirk for twelve generations. (Here a quiet smile stole over my lady's features.) They said with reason at those *tableaux* at the Vanes, that with that helmet on he was the image of young Sir Maurice, who died at Edgehill with the colours twisted round him. I

wonder if it was his poor mother who had her dead boy painted so. 'Tis certain that she thought: 'Ah, were he but alive, there would be no such thing as sorrow more for me.' Yet here I have him. Ah (here she grew as pale as death), why did *I* ever let my Walter be a soldier? What weakness to give way—to the very peril of him for whom I was so weak! He would have gone to the wars themselves but for good Dr. Haldane, through whom (thanks to the duke) he was not gazetted to the corps he had applied for. Why did he not choose the bar, like his elder brother? How he would have moved men's hearts to mercy with that winning tongue! Or why did he not become God's messenger—I am sure he has an angel's face—and carry the news those bells are telling of to shipwrecked souls? Oftentimes, when, as a child, he knelt beside me to say his prayers, his very looks have seemed to make the action more sacred. Goodness seemed better worth when he was praying for it, and heaven no home for saints unless he shared it! God grant that he may grow up a good man!

"Then Letty, too—what mother's wealth must I possess since that sweet girl is not the chief of it, the central jewel of my crown? When matched with others of her age—with this Rose Aynton, for example—how bright and fair she shows! Not but that Rose is a good girl, doubtless; accomplished, too, beyond her years, and far beyond her opportunities—she sparkles like a crystal cut in ten thousand facets; but my own Letty is the flawless diamond, bright and pure as light itself. What blessings are these three! May Heaven keep them always as I deem them now. I wish my Walter were a little less impulsive; but the darling boy is young. As for dear Richard, I have no fears for him. The proud lad will find some noble helpmate, meet to—Great Heaven! what is that?"

A burst of melody without fell suddenly upon the midnight air, and at the same moment the chamber-door opened to the touch of Mistress Forest, her ladyship's

confidential maid. "I beg your pardon, my lady, if I startled you; but I knocked twice, and could not make you hear."

"It was not you, Mary, that startled me," returned Lady Lisgard; "it was the sudden music. The Christmas waits, as I suppose?"

"Yes, my lady. They came up from the village a little while ago, and have been staying in the servants' hall for the clock to strike twelve."

"I trust they have all had supper?"

"You may be sure of that, my lady. Mrs. Welsh is as openhanded (with your ladyship's property) as any cook in the county; nor is George Steve a likely man to sit thirsty while he sees others drink. One would think that a publichouse-keeper should have drinking enough at home; but — pardon, my lady—I am making complaints which, however just, I know you dislike to hear, and, besides, I am interrupting the carol."

Earthly friends will change and falter,
Earthly hearts will vary;
He is born that cannot alter,
Of the Virgin Mary.

Born to-day—

Raise the lay;

Born to-day—

Twine the bay.

Jesus Christ is born to suffer,
Born for you—born for you;

Holly strew:

Jesus Christ was born to conquer,
Born to save—born to save;

Laurel wave:

Jesus Christ was born to govern,
Born a king—born a king;

Bay-wreaths bring:

Jesus Christ was born of Mary,
Born for all. Well befall Hearth and Hall.

Here the manly but not unmelodious voices exchanged their verse for prose, if Christmas good-wishes can be said to be mere prose. "A merry Christmas and a happy New Year to your ladyship, and many on 'em!"

Lady Lisgard moved to the window with a smile, and drawing the curtain aside, threw up the sash. On the white lawn beneath, stood five dark figures, bearing various instruments of music, and one a huge horn lantern, the light of which glinted upon the laurels. It was impossible to recognise the features of the rest, as they stood cap in hand, notwithstanding the still driving snow, awaiting her ladyship's reply ; but she addressed them each by name nevertheless.

"Mr. Steve, I thank you kindly. Henry Ash, I am glad to find you in good voice again. John Lewis and Peter Stone—if I am not mistaken. Neighbours and friends all, I thank you very much. But it is a cold night for caroling, and I hope you have been taken care of within. A merry Christmas to you and a happy New Year." There was a tremor in my lady's voice, although she spoke with such particularity, which showed how deeply she was moved.

"God bless your ladyship," returned the voices, disorderly as to unison, but each one of itself distinct and clear as file-firing.—"God bless Sir Richard, and send him a fair bride.—God bless Master Walter's handsome face.—God bless Miss Letty."

Lady Lisgard closed the window, but as she did so, dropped the heavy curtain between herself and the lighted chamber, so that she could still look out, but without being seen. The curtain, too, cut her off from the observation of her maid within. "Who is the fifth man that bears the lantern, Mary ?" asked her ladyship in a tone of carelessness, very unsuited to the expression of her face, which all in a moment had grown pinched and terror-stricken, as though it hungered for some reply that it yet dreaded to hear.

"Nobody as you know, my lady, nor indeed as *I* know, for the matter of that. He's a stranger in these parts, who's putting up at the *Lisgard Arms*. He only came for a few days last week, walking across the country for all the world like a pedler—a way he says he learned

in foreign parts ; but Steve with his odd ways has taken his fancy, so that he stays on. A very well-spoken sort of person he is too, although the sea, it seems, has been his calling, which is a rough trade. However, he has made it answer—according at least to Mr. Steve. Any way he flings his money about free enough, and indeed is what *I* call rather too fond of treating folks. He is good company himself, they say, and a favourite with everybody he comes across, which is a very dangerous thing—that is,” added Mistress Forest, correcting herself, “unless one is a gentleman, like handsome Master Walter.”

“ You don’t—remember—this—this person’s name, Mary, do you ? ” asked Lady Lisgard.

“ No, strange to say, I don’t, my lady ; although but a moment ago it was on the tip of my tongue. It is something like Hathaway.”

A trace of colour once more returns to my lady’s cheek, and her breath, which, by reason perhaps of the confined space in which she stands, has seemed to be stifled during the narration of her maid, now comes and goes with a little less of effort.

“ That is his voice, I reckon, my lady—yes, I thought so—and the new carol which he has been teaching the choir.”

O’er the hill and o’er the vale
Come three kings together,
Caring nought for snow and hail,
Cold, and wind, and weather ;
Now on Persia’s sandy plains,
Now where Tigris swells with rains,
They their camels tether.
Now through Syrian lands they go,
Now through Moab, faint and slow,
Now o’er Edom’s heather.

“ Ah, now I’ve got it, my lady,” cried Mistress Forest triumphantly. “ It isn’t Hathaway. He’s the man they were talking of in the servants’-hall as has just bought the

windmill of old Daniels, and that was how I confused them. The stranger's name is Derrick—a Mr. Derrick."

My lady's dimpled hand flew to her heart, and would have pressed against it had she any strength to do so. Her limbs, however, were nerveless, and shook as if she had the ague. But for the window-seat, she must have dropped ; and as it was, leaned, huddled up against it, a shapeless form, decked in gray satin and pearls indeed, but as unlike my lady as those poor wretches whom we strangle for a show are unlike themselves, who seem to lose, the instant that the fatal bolt is drawn, all fellowship with the human, and become mere bundles of clothes. The drop had fallen, and without warning, from under Lady Lisgard's feet, but unhappily the victim was conscious, and not dead.





CHAPTER III.

ONLY "THE HEART."

GNORANT of the ruin it had wrought, the rich full voice of the stranger still rang forth, manifestly to the admiration of the confidential maid, since her nimble tongue failed to interrupt its melody. She was not displeased that her lady too was listening with such unbroken attention, and probably also looking out upon the singer; for Mr. Derrick was a very "proper man"—at all events in external appearance—and had shown himself in the servants' hall a while ago by no means unconscious of the personal charms of Mistress Forest, which, although mature, were still by no means despicable. A few years younger than my lady herself, Mary had been treated by time at least with equal courtesy; her figure was plump, her eyes were bright, her voice, which, if not absolutely musical, could reach some very high notes, and upon occasion, was clear and cheery. One would have said she would have been too talkative to have suited my lady's grave and quiet ways; but this was not so. Lady Lisgard had that blessed gift of being able not to listen unless it pleased her to do so, which enables so many conscientious persons to speak favourably of sermons; all the avalanche of her maid's eloquence passed clean over her head, and suffered her to pursue her own meditations at the easy tribute of an appreciating nod when all was ended. Even had she

been much more inconvenienced by the *débris* of words, her tormentor would have been freely forgiven. The affection between mistress and maid was deep and genuine, and had extended over more than half their lifetime.

Mary Forest was the daughter of a fisherman at Coveton, the village on whose sandy beach Sir Robert had picked up his bride. To old Jacob Forest's cottage, the human flotsam and jetsam had been conveyed, and upon Mary, then almost a child, had much of its tending at first devolved. The kindly little nurse soon won the regard of her patient, cut off by that one night's storm from kith and kin, for this emigrant ship had contained all that were near or dear to her on earth, and ready as a babe to clasp the tendrils of love about whoever showed her kindness. Removed from the cottage to the rectory, where the clergyman and his wife welcomed her very hospitably, first, as a poor human waif, that claimed some lodgment ere she could decide upon her future calling, for a short time after that as their nursery governess, and finally as guest and inmate pending those arrangements of her betrothed husband which subsequently took her to France, Lucy Gavestone—for that was the name by which my lady was then known—did not forget little Mary and her loving ministrations. She asked and easily obtained permission of Sir Robert that the girl should accompany her to the semi-scholastic establishment at Dijon in which he had decided to place her previous to their marriage. This she accordingly did; and many a strange reminiscence unshared by others (itself a great knitter of the bond of friendship) had mistress and maid in common. The fortunes of the latter of course rose with those of the former, and of all the household of Mirk Abbey there was none in higher trust than Mary Forest, nor more certain of the envied position she held, since the affection of my lady set her above the machinations of that Nemesis of favourite servants, a Domestic Cabal. Those natural enemies, the butler and the cook, had even shaken hands together for the purpose

of compassing Mary's downfall, but their combined endeavours had only obtained for a reward her sovereign forgiveness and (I am afraid I must add) contempt.

In a word, Mary Forest was as happy in her circumstances as any woman at her time of life could expect to be whose title of "Mistress" was only brevet rank. She had subjugated many other male folks beside the butler (the ancient coachman, for example, with the back view of whose broad shoulders and no neck the Lisgard family had been familiar for half a century), but such victories had not at all been owing to her charms. By them, hitherto, man had been an unconquered animal, and this was the knot in the otherwise smooth surface of Mary's destiny which no amount of planning (within her philosophy) could make even. She had been wooed, of course (what woman of twoscore, according to her own account, has not?), but hitherto the suitors had not been eligible, or her own ideas had been too ambitious. The time had now arrived with her when compromise begins to be expedient, and high expectations abate. Matrimonial opportunities at the Abbey were few and far between. She had not received such marked attention from anybody for months as this stranger, living upon his own means at the *Lisgard Arms*, had paid her that very night in the servants'-hall. No wonder, then, that while he sang, she should for once be content to be a listener.

O'er the hill and o'er the vale
Each king bears a present ;
Wise men go a child to hail,
Monarchs seek a peasant ;
And a star in front proceeds,
Over rocks and rivers leads,
Shines with beams incessant.
Therefore onward, onward still,
Ford the stream, and climb the hill—
Love makes all things pleasant.

"There, now, I call that very pretty, my lady," exclaimed Mistress Forest, as the last cadence died away;

“and a very pretty sentiment at the end—‘Love makes all things pleasant,’ although for my part, I know nothing about *that*, thank Heaven, and prefer to be my own mistress—that is, with the exception of your ladyship, to obey whom is a labour of love. I am sure there are few husbands for whom I would give up such a service as yours, my lady. I wish Mr. What’s-his-name—dear me, how stupid of me—ah, Derrick! It’s rather a pretty name too ; don’t you think so, my lady? I wish this Mr. Derrick would sing us another song. He has a very beautiful voice, and I am sure his expression—don’t you think so, my lady? Ahem. No ; I hear them moving off. Well, he will be in the choir to-morrow morning, that’s sure. Had you not better come to the fire my—Ah, great Heaven! Mistress, my dear darling mistress, what is the matter? Let me ring for help !”

It was impossible to misunderstand my lady’s “No,” although it was not articulate. Huddled up, as I have said, in the space between the curtain and the window-seat, white and cold as the snow without, voiceless and almost breathless as her maid found her upon venturing to draw aside the heavy damask folds between them, such a look of agonised apprehension yet shot from her eyes as at once to prevent Mistress Forest from putting her design with respect to the bell into effect ; nay, more, having assisted my lady to the sofa, she rightly interpreted a second glance in the direction of the door, to mean “Lock it,” and this she did even before arranging the cushions, which would have been the first action with most persons of her class. Mary Forest, although a babbler, was no fool, and she perceived immediately that the distress which was agitating her beloved mistress was at least as much mental as physical. Once before, and only once, she had known my lady to be what females call “overcome”—that was upon the eve of her marriage with Sir Robert ; there was much similarity between the two attacks, but the present was far more violent. In the first instance, she had been told by her

ladyship that it was owing to "the heart," which was fitting enough under her then circumstances—but now when there was no bridegroom-expectant to flutter that organ, it did seem singular certainly. Doubtless her mistress would speak presently, and afford the fullest information; in the meantime there was nothing for it but silence and sal volatile.

My lady's eyes are closed, and her features pale and still as marble, but her lips are a little parted. With her white hands thus crosswise over her bosom, she looks, thinks the confidential maid—for all the world like that Dame Lisgard in the chancel, by the side of whose marble couch her twelve fair children kneel, and take their mother's ceaseless blessing. All twelve so near of an age, and so marvellously alike, thanks to the skill of the sculptor, that one would have thought the whole dozen—but that four, as Mistress Forest has read in *Portents and Prodigies*, is the extreme limit—had made their simultaneous arrival in the world. Stiff and cold almost as marble are my lady's limbs, blue-veined like it and rounded; but by degrees, as Mary rubs them steadily, their life returns.

"Thank you, thank you," murmurs her ladyship. "I feel better now; but" (this with effort) "I wish to be left alone."

"Alone, my lady! I dare not leave you thus, without even knowing what ails you."

"Nothing ails me now, Mary—nothing." Lady Lisgard made a feint of smiling, but kept her eyelids shut. She did not dare to let her maid read what was written in her eyes.

"Was it your poor heart, again, Madam?"

"Ay, my poor heart!" My lady was speaking truth there. Among the thousand millions born to suffer on this earth, there was not one upon that Christmas Eve in mental agony more deep than hers. The blow received had been so terrible and unexpected, that it had at first half stupified all feeling; the real torture was now com-

mencing, when she was about to realise the full extent of her injuries. Lady Lisgard was not without courage; but she was no Indian warrior to desire a spectator of such torments. “I must be alone, dear Mary,” repeated she. “Be sure you breathe no word of this to anyone. Say, however, that I am not very well. The cold when I opened that window to the wafts”—here she visibly shuddered—“seems to have frozen me to the marrow—you may tell them I have taken cold. I shall not be down to breakfast.”

“And I should recommend you to stay indoors, my dear (as I hope to persuade Miss Letty to do), although it *is* Christmas Day,” said Mary tenderly, as she made up the fire before leaving the room; “for the church is far from warm.”

“I shall not go to church,” said Lady Lisgard, with a decision that reassured her attendant, and enabled her to wish her mistress “good-night” without much apprehension.

“He will be in the choir to-morrow morning,” was the thought which was crossing the minds of mistress and maid at the same instant.





CHAPTER IV.

SIR RICHARD GAINS HIS POINT.

DON'T know how it was in the monkish times in England, but it appears that the keeping of religious days — always excepting the Sabbath — is not in accordance with the genius of this country as it exists at present. By general habit, we are devout, or certainly reverent! and yet the majority seem unable to discriminate between a fast and a festival. Christmas Day, for example, is kept by the evangelical folks exactly like Sunday, which is with them very much the reverse of a feast-day. With the High Church people, again, it is a holiday, to be enjoyed after a certain peculiar fashion of their own ; while the great mass of the population outrage both these parties by treating half the day as a fast and the other half as a festival. After morning church, it is generally understood that one may enjoy one's self—that is, within the limit of the domestic circle. There is the rub. It is not every disposition which can appreciate forfeits and snap-dragon. My own respected grandfather used to thank Heaven with much devotion that he had always been a domestic man, who knew how to enjoy a peaceful Christmas in the bosom of his family ; but then he always went to sleep immediately after dinner, and nobody ventured to wake him until the servants came in to prayers, after which he went to bed.

It is a pleasant sight, says Holy Writ, to see brethren dwelling together in unity; but the remark would not have been put on record had the spectacle been a very common one. It is a sad confession to make, but I think most of us must own that the “family gathering” in the country, even at Christmas-tide, is not the most agreeable sort of social entertainment. There is too much predetermination to be jolly about such festivities, too much resolution to put up with Polly’s temper and Jack’s rudeness, and to please grandpapa (who is funded) at all hazards. When we find ourselves in the up-train again after that domestic holiday-week, we are not altogether displeased that it is over, and secretly congratulate ourselves that there has not been a row. I am, of course, speaking of ordinary folks, such as the world is mainly composed of, and not of such exemplary people as my readers and myself. *We* have no family jealousies, no struggles for grandpapa’s favour, no difficulties in having common patience with Polly, no private opinion—if he was not our brother—about Jack ; no astonishment at Henry’s success, no envy at Augusta’s prospects. But with the majority of grown-up brothers and sisters, this is not so. Since they parted from one another under the paternal roof, their lines of life have diverged daily ; their interests, so far from being identical, have become antagonistic. Margaret is as nice as ever, but Penelope is not a bit improved, and yet one must seem to be as glad to see one as the other. One must not only forgive, but forget ; it is not (unhappily) necessary that we should be polite, but we must be affectionate ; nay, we must not only be affectionate—grandpapa will think it extremely odd if we are not “gushing.”

The Lisgard family circle was not large, though, as we have seen, there was room in it for disagreement ; moreover, there was not a “dead set” of domestic element, the consanguinity being relieved by the presence of Miss Rose Aynton. If grandpapa were wise this should always be the case ; for it prevents Courtesy from taking leave of

the company, which she is only too apt to do, under the mistaken notion that near relations can afford to do without her. It was with no such intention, however, that my lady had asked Miss Aynton to visit Mirk. She would have thought it hard, indeed, if her two sons could not have spent a week together under the same roof without the presence of a stranger to prevent their quarrelling. Rose had been a school-friend of Letty, and the latter young lady had asked permission to invite her young friend to the Abbey for Christmas. She had no home of her own to go to, poor thing, having neither father nor mother. She lived with her aunt, Miss Colyfield, a fashionable old lady in Mayfair, very popular among her acquaintance, but a sort of person, not uncommon in that locality, whom it is not altogether charming to reside with as a dependant. Miss Aynton was evidently accustomed to suppression. It made a man positively indignant to see one whose youth and intelligence entitled her to be the mistress of all who approached her, so humble, so unegotistic, so grateful. It was evident that she had plenty of natural good spirits, and every faculty for enjoyment, if she had only dared exhibit them. Her very accomplishments, which were numerous, were timidly concealed, and peeped forth one by one, almost, as it seemed, by compulsion. She might have left Mirk, for instance, without a soul knowing of her taste for ecclesiastical decoration, if it had not been for a sore throat which prevented Letty from superintending the Christmas ornamentations in the chancel.

"Can't *you* do it, my dear?" said Letty, a little peevish at the disappointment, and hopeless that her place could be satisfactorily filled by a London-bred girl like Rose, who had never seen holly-berries except in the greengrocers' shops, or at the artificial florist's. "Now, do try, and Richard and Walter will both help."

"I will do my best, dear," this young lady had answered simply. And never had anything so beautiful been seen in the county, as was the result of her efforts.

So much was said of them that Letty had ventured to go to church that morning, despite her ailment, and was as earnest in her praise as any in the congregation. There was no such thing as jealousy in her composition, and the success of her friend was a genuine pleasure to her.

"Oh, mamma, you have missed such a sight!" cried she, as Lady Lisgard made her first appearance that morning at the luncheon-table, looking a little grave and pale, but gracious and dignified as a queen in exile, as usual. "Not only the chancel, but the whole church a perfect bower of evergreens, and everything so exquisitely done! The pillars, alternately ivy and laurel; and under the gallery, beautiful texts in holly-berries set in green. As for the wall at the back of the altar—the decorations there are such that it makes one cry to think they are ever to be taken down again. Oh, I do hope you will feel well enough, dear mamma, to come to church this afternoon and see them."

"Really, Lady Lisgard," said Miss Aynton, blushing deeply, and with her soft eyes looking very much inclined to be tearful, "you must not believe all that Letty's kindness induces her to say about me."

"Nay, but it's true, mother," broke forth Sir Richard. "I never could have dreamt of anything so beautiful being made out of leaves and berries. The old church looks enchanted, and Miss Aynton is the fairy that has done it."

"Sir Richard suggested the centre design himself," returned Rose gravely; "and the fact is, I am nothing but a plagiarist in the whole affair. Our curate in Park Street gives himself up to floral religion, and dresses up his church in a dozen different garbs according to the season. I am one of its volunteer tiring-woman, and am therefore accustomed to the business—that is all."

"It is very honest of you to tell us that, Rose," said my lady approvingly.

"Yes, mamma," broke in Letty; "but it was very wicked of her not to tell Mr. Mosely, who came to

thank her in the churchyard after service. He actually made an allusion to her in his sermon—talked about her ‘pious hands.’ She never told *him* one word about this London curate.”

Letty’s laugh rang merrily out as she thus twitted her friend, but her brothers did not echo it. Neither of them relished this mention of the Mayfair clergyman. They had each in turn enjoyed that religious work, in which they had been fellow-labourers with Miss Aynton, and each perhaps flattered himself that she had been most pleased when his own fingers were looping the berries for her, or holding the ivy while she fastened it in its place. Of course there was nothing serious between either of them and herself. Sir Richard would naturally look higher for a bride than to the dependent niece of a fickle old woman of fashion; while as to Walter, with his comparatively small fortune and expensive tastes, it was absolutely necessary that he should “marry money,” and not mere expectations. Still, no man is altogether pleased to hear that a young girl he admires is engaged to somebody else; and although this had not been said of Rose, yet Mayfair curates are dangerous persons, and church decoration (as they were aware by recent experience) is a fascinating occupation when indulged in by both sexes at the same time.

So Letty had all the laughter to herself.

“How strange it was to hear the people when they first came in,” continued she. “Their ‘Ohs !’ and ‘Ahs !’ and ‘Well I nevers !’ were quite irrepressible.”

“Especially the gentleman in the gallery, who expressed his opinion that it was for all the world like May-day,” observed Walter slyly. “Miss Aynton’s *chef-d’œuvre* reminded him, it seems, of Jack-in-the-Green.”

“Yes, was it not shocking, mamma?” exclaimed Letty. “He spoke quite loud. I shouldn’t suppose that the creature had ever been in a church before. How he did stare about him !”

“You must have been looking in his direction your-

self, Miss," returned the young dragoon, "as, indeed, were all the female part of the congregation. We don't see such awful beards as his in Mirk Church every Sunday."

"How touchy dear Walter is upon the subject of beards," observed Letty demurely.

The captain's smooth face coloured like a girl's, while Miss Rose Aynton sought concealment in her pocket-handkerchief. Even Lady Lisgard forced herself to smile at the embarrassment of her handsome boy. But Sir Richard did not smile; he was not on sufficiently good terms with his younger brother to enjoy even so innocent a joke at his expense.

"You have not yet seen this distinguished stranger, I suppose, mamma?" resumed Letty, without whom—what with Rose's shyness and the coldness between the two young men—the conversation would have languished altogether.

"What stranger do you mean, my dear?" said my lady coldly.

"Why, the man that came with the waits last night, and sang beneath your window. Surely you must have noticed his voice, so different from poor old Ash and the rest of them."

"Now you mention it, Letty, I think I did remark that there was a strange singer among them. He had a voice like Mr. Steve's."

"Very probably, my dear mother," observed Walter, laughing; "for they both use the same tuning-key—the spigot. Steve is said to be quite jealous because this gentleman from foreign parts can take two glasses to his one, although it cannot be added that he doesn't show it. Steve can look like a Methodist parson when he pleases, whereas his new friend has made a sacrifice of his very countenance to Bacchus; and yet he must have been a handsome fellow at one time.—Don't you think so, Miss Aynton?"

"I really scarcely looked at him," returned the young

lady addressed. “I should hesitate to pass an opinion upon this distinguished——”

“Oh, Rose,” interrupted Letty, archly; “how dare you!—Why, Walter, she told me herself, only five minutes ago, while we were taking off our bonnets, that she thought his expression ‘magnificent,’ that was her very word—and that she would like to take him in chalks.”

“I must confess,” said Rose, “without venturing to call it good-looking or otherwise, that his countenance, artistically speaking, seems to me very striking. He is just one of those wicked people, I fancy, in whom one feels a sort of interest in spite of one’s self.—Now, don’t you think so, Sir Richard?”

“My dear Miss Aynton,” returned the baronet with an air of hauteur that neutralised the familiarity implied by his words, “if this person has won your sympathy, he is fortunate indeed; but I must say that I don’t see that he deserves it. His beard, which is certainly a handsome one,—has also—as it seems to me—the great advantage of obscuring half his countenance. I confess, I think he looks to be a scoundrel of the first salt-water.”

“That’s what Rose *means!*” cried Letty, clapping her hands. He’s one of those dear handsome villains who used to—ah, infest—yes, that’s the phrase—who used to infest the Spanish Main. How charmingly mysterious was the very place in which they carried on their profession! If it was not for sea-sickness, I should like to have had something to do in the Spanish Main myself. I have not the shadow of a doubt that this Mr. Derrick—evidently an assumed name——What’s the matter, dearest mother?”

My lady had uttered a low cry, such as is evoked by sudden and acute physical pain.

“Nothing, my love—nothing: it was a passing spasm, nothing more. A tinge of my old rheumatism again, I fear, which is a sign of old age, and therefore a malady I do not wish to be taken notice of.—Now, don’t distress

yourselves, my dears"—for all had risen with looks of genuine and affectionate anxiety, except Miss Aynton, who had rapidly poured out a glass of wine. "Thank you, Rose; that was all I wanted. Nobody offered me any sherry, so I thought I would try whether I could not obtain it medicinally. What were you saying, Letty, about this—this person?"

"I was merely remarking that he had probably been a bucanier, mamma."

"In other words, that he deserves hanging," observed Sir Richard gruffly. "I hope he will soon take himself out of the parish, for we have got tipplers enough in it already."

"Dear, dear, dear!" said Letty, sedately; "to make such an observation as that, just after mamma has been craving for sherry! Besides, how can this gentleman annoy *you*, Sir Richard? He isn't come here to dispute the title, is he?"

My lady kept her lips closed this time; but an anguish passed over her face that would have been easy to see, had not the eyes of those at table been otherwise engaged.

Letty was looking at her friend, in hopes that she should get her to laugh at her high and mighty brother; Rose did not dare look up, for fear she should do so. Walter, his handsome lips slightly curled, was contemptuously watching the baronet, who stared, Sphinx-like, right before him, as was his custom whenever he was in one of his autocratic humours, as at present.

"I don't choose to have persons of that sort in the parish," said he, with icy distinctness.

"But, my dear Richard, you can't turn him out," reasoned Letty, rather vexed by an exhibition of her brother's pride before her school-friend beyond what she had calculated upon. "He has a right to stop at the *Lisgard Arms* as long as he pleases."

"And *I* have a right to turn Steve out as a tenant——"

"You have nothing of the kind, Richard," interposed Walter, quietly: "you have no more right than *I*—not

even legal right, for the inn is not yet yours, and as for moral right, it would be the most monstrous piece of territorial oppression ever heard of out of Poland. So long as the man behaves himself ——”

“He does *not* behave himself,” put in Sir Richard angrily. “He is a drunkard, and a brawler in church.”

“Gracious mercy! how you must have been looking up Burn’s *Justice*. But you will not be a magistrate, a *custos rotulorum*, till you are of age, remember, so that he is safe for six months. In the meantime, he certainly means to stay here. He is so good as to say he likes Mirk, I understand; and the village folks like *him*. He is a great addition to the choir; and I shall certainly ask him, in case he remains, to join our Mirk volunteers: Steve tells me he is a most admirable shot with a rifle, and will do the corps credit.”

“That is all the worse,” quoth Sir Richard, violently; “he is only the more likely to be a poacher. We have more than enough of that sort already, and I beg that you will give none such your encouragement.”

“Encouragement!” returned Walter, airily. “What patronage have *I* to offer? I am not Sir Richard, who can make a man happy with a word.”

“Very well,” continued the baronet with suppressed passion, “let him take care how he trespasses upon the Abbey-lands—that’s all.”

“Nay, you’ll see him at the Abbey itself,” laughed Walter, carelessly, “and that pretty often, unless I quite misinterpreted Mistress Forest’s manner when she parted from him at the Lych Gate: I never saw two people more affectionate upon so short an acquaintance.”

“A most ineligible suitor, I am sure,” broke forth the baronet. “I trust Mary is not fool enough to disgrace herself at her time of life by any such alliance.”

“She is almost old enough to choose for herself,” responded Walter, drily. “The selection of a husband for one’s servant is scarcely the privilege of even a lord of the manor, and when the servant is not one’s own——”

"I believe, Sir," interrupted Sir Richard, hastily, "that I am only speaking the sentiments of her mistress, in whose hands, of course, the matter lies. Mother, do you not agree with me that it would be very unwise to encourage any attachment between Mary Forest and this reprobate stranger, Derrick?"

It was plain my lady had not recovered from her late ailment, of whatever nature the attack might have been; otherwise, she would have interfered between the brothers before a direct appeal for her decision had been made by either of them, it being a rule with her never to place herself in an invidious position with respect to her children. To the astonishment of the baronet himself, however, Lady Lisgard now forced her pale lips to utter deliberately enough: "I think it would be very unwise."

"And therefore," pursued Sir Richard, hastening to push his advantage, "it would be worse than unwise, it would be absolute cruelty, since you do not intend her to marry this fellow, that opportunities should be afforded her of meeting him under the same roof. I do not say that his offence of brawling in church this morning is a sufficient ground of itself for forbidding him the house, although to most persons with any sense of decency it would be a serious misdemeanour: but would it not be well, under these particular circumstances, to treat it so?"

"Yes," returned my lady, rising from the table, white as a ghost, "you are right, Richard; let this Mr. Derrick be forbidden the house."





CHAPTER V.

M A S T E R W A L T E R .

GHE day after Christmas Day was friendly to the fox ; in other words, a hard frost ; and since Miss Rose Aynton and Letty had declined to play at billiards with Walter until the afternoon—for it is vicious (in the country) to indulge in that pastime in the morning, as it is to play at cards before candle-light—that young gentleman, being no reader, felt the time rather heavy on his hands, and strolled into the village to get rid of it. The snow had ceased to fall, but not before, like a good housekeeper when the family has left town, it had covered up everything very carefully, except the tops of the chimneys, through which the tidings of good-cheer rolled forth in dusky columns from every cottage ; for there were no abject poor in Mirk, thanks to my lady, or any that lacked victuals at that joyous season. The Lisdards had ever been a free-handed race, as generous out of doors as hospitable within ; and their influence for good had been felt for generations throughout the village. I do not say that they expected no repayment ; their rule was paternal, and they looked for something like filial obedience in return. If a villager had passed any member of that august family without pulling his hair, as though it were a bell-handle, in token of respect, it would have been considered a sign of revolution, and they

would have congratulated themselves that the yeomanry were in a state of efficiency. The feudal system was still in vogue at Mirk, but tempered not only by excellent beef-tea in sickness, and port wine from the Abbey cellar during convalescence, but by the best Gothic architecture, as applied to cottages. If eleven human beings did sometimes sleep in a single room, and the domestic arrangements were inferior to those which Mr. Chifney of the Farm provided for his race-horses, the tenement looked outside very picturesque, as seen from the Abbey windows. Nay, it must be owned that even this inconvenience of overcrowding was rare in the home-village, in comparison with other places on the Lisgard estate, not so near the family seat, about which everything was in externals, at least, becomingly spick and span.

Dr. Haldane, indeed, who had property of his own, and could afford to entertain political opinions at variance with those in favour at the Abbey, had been of old accustomed irreverently to adapt a certain popular nursery ballad to the state of things at Mirk.

Who built the infant school so red ?
Who set that striking-clock o'erhead,
To tell us all the time for bed ?

The Lisgards.

Who made, and at such great expense,
Around our pond that iron fence,
To keep the pigs and boys from thence ?
The Lisgards, &c.

In short, Mirk was a pet hamlet, and exhibited a hundred tokens of its patron's favour. It was surely only right and proper, therefore, that all the votes in the village at election time, except the doctor's, went the same way with the squire's, and that even in social matters he exercised unquestioned sway. Mirk was as respectable as the brotherhood of Quakers, and was rendered so by the same simple machinery ; anyone in the place who showed a disposition to be otherwise was immediately turned out.

Did a man drink, so as to cause public disturbance, or pick up sticks (to save himself trouble) out of the park-fences—or, worse than all, did he poach—were it but a pheasant's egg—he received the most peremptory notice to quit the model village. The issuing of these ukases of banishment had been, now and then, a severe trial to the popularity of the Lisgards ; but it had overlived all such acts—nay, more, even its favouritism, that seemingly indispensable element of the feudal system, had been forgiven it. Nobody now complained that George Steve, who notoriously never went to bed quite sober, still continued tenant of the *Lisgard Arms* ; while Jacob Flail and Joseph Dibble had been condemned, with their families, to banishment for life for a less habitual commission of the same offence.

Much less did it strike the villagers that it was inconsistent in a landlord, so careful for the morality of his people, to let so large a portion of the Abbey Farm to a trainer of race-horses, of which there were at present upwards of thirty in Mirk ; and in summer, when the Downland above was fit for their exercise, there were often twice as many. But then Mr. Chifney was not like an ordinary trainer ; nor did his jockey-boys, thanks to his strict supervision, behave like ordinary jockey-boys. They attended divine service on alternate Sundays, and half-a-dozen of them were in the choir. Mr. Moseley (who was Anglican) had even taken into consideration the advisability of putting these last into surplices, but Mr. Chifney had dissuaded him from that experiment. They had always been accustomed to the most tight-fitting of garments, strait-waistcoats, buck-skin breeches, and gaiters—and perhaps he thought the transition would be too abrupt. Their habits, in some other respects, were loose, and yet they were suffered to breathe the Lisgard air. Mr. Chifney's boys were like the servants of ambassadors at foreign courts, who enjoy a separate jurisdiction from that to which the native inhabitants submit. The law itself—at least in the case of petty offences—was not

called in to punish these young gentlemen ; but I believe they were “colted”—for the whole discipline was “horsey”—by Mr. Chifney’s head-groom. I do not know the exact manner in which this chastisement was inflicted, but it must have differed from the ordinary method, since they never failed to pursue their daily equestrian duties as usual. Mr. Chifney looked after that himself, and exceedingly sharp. Nothing went amiss through oversight in his establishment, and his employers had every reason to put confidence in him. He left no means untried to insure the success of the costly animals it was his mission to groom and guard. His very acceptance of the post of churchwarden had been described by his enemies as an attempt to “hedge”—to make friends with those powers of good which are generally supposed to be antagonistic, if they have anything to do with it at all, to the profession of horse-racing. It is certain that Mr. Chifney, whose occupations seldom permitted his own attendance at public worship, never failed to come to church upon those Sundays which immediately preceded the Derby and the St. Leger, and indeed it is very likely that he treated them (without knowing it) as the eves of his patron saints’ days.

It was to the Abbey Farm that Mr. Walter Lisgard was now bound ; for to the young gentlemen of England, what is a more interesting spectacle than a racing-stable —what is a more charming subject of conversation than the next Great Event ? And who more fitted to afford every information upon that important topic—if he chose —than Mr. Tite Chifney ? *If he chose.* Therein lay the whole matter ; for Mr. Chifney was reticent, as became one intrusted with a hundred thousand pounds’ worth of horseflesh, upon whose performances depended perhaps, in the aggregate, millions of money. He had put “Master Walter” up to a “good thing,” however, more than once, and the captain had no doubt but that he would do it again. He never did doubt of his own success either with man or woman. Confidence, but

without swagger, self-content, but without vanity, were evident enough in those handsome features, illuminated almost at all times with the desire to please. He lit his cigar at the hall door, smoothed away a fallen spark from his sealskin waistcoat, and took his way down the leafless avenue, humming the latest lively air, as he crunched the snow beneath his dainty boots. How different from Sir Richard's measured step and haughty silence, thought the gatekeeper's wife, as she hastened out of the lodge, from the side-window of which she had marked her favourite approach. "Never mind me, Martha," cried he laughing; "I'm tall enough now to lift the latch for myself. My boots are thicker than yours are—look—and I have no rheumatism, which, I am afraid, you have not quite got rid of yet. There—I won't speak a word with you till you go inside. How's the guidman? Ah, out, is he? How's little Polly? Hullo, Polly, how you're grown! Why, I dare say she won't kiss me now, as she always used to do."

"Oh yes, she'll kiss you, Master Walter," answered the old dame; "there's no harm in kissing o' *you*; although I wouldn't say that to my daughter of ne'er another young man in the county.—Come, lass, you need not blush so, for I've had many a one from the same young gentleman." And the old dame laughed and chuckled, until that dread enemy of honest-hearted mirth the lumbago, twitched her into her chair.

Polly, a very pretty country lassie, about sixteen, stood pink and hesitating while the captain removed his cigar, and waited—smiling demigod—for the promised favour.

"Come, gi'e it to him, and ha' done wi' it," cried the old lady, exasperated by her torments. Thereupon the girl stepped forward, head aside. Master Walter met her, touched her soft cheek with his lip, and as his silken moustache brushed her ear, whispered an airy something which turned her crimson. There was nothing in the words themselves save the merest compliment; their

magic lay in the tone of him who used them ; so tender, yet so frank, so familiar, and yet so gracious. Then, with a smile, he bade them both "good-bye," and strolling through the gate, resumed his interrupted duty, as though kissing were the most innocent as well as the most natural of all pastimes ; but Polly pressed her throbbing brow against the pane for its very coolness, and watched him saunter down the village street with quite a flutter at her heart, and promised to herself that she would not forget the captain's kiss—no, not though Joe, the under-gardener, should speak his mind next "feast" (as it was rumoured in well-informed circles that he intended to do), and "keep her company" in earnest.

That she was doing no wrong in this was certain, for not only her mother, but everybody else in Mirk, agreed that there was no sort of harm in Master Walter, let him do what he might. He had a way of doing things so very different from others. How the very dogs fawned upon him as he sauntered on, and the old horse in the straw-yard stretched its gray head over the gate in hopes of a caress as he went by ! How the boys by the roadside left their Snow-man an unfinished torso, and ran to make their bows before the good-natured captain, with an eye to *largesse*, in the form of a copper scramble : and how the school-girls courtesied, with admiring awe, as they pictured to themselves how fine a figure handsome Master Walter must needs cut in gold and scarlet ! He had a nod or a word for almost everybody, young or old ; but if his look but lit upon another's face, it left a pleasure there, as the sun leaves when it has shone upon one. Delayed by these reciprocal manifestations of good-will, like a young prince making a Royal Progress among a well-affected people, Walter Lisgard at length got free of the village, and climbing a steep hill (never used by the race-horses even in much less slippery weather), arrived at his destination, the Abbey Farm. This was a long, low, ancient building, belonging to one could scarce tell what date, so pieced, and restored,

and added to, had been the original structure ; but when the Abbey was an Abbey the Abbey Farm had been a sort of branch-establishment, in the occupation of the monks ; there were traces of their sojourn even now : over the pointed porch yet stood a cross of stone, though broken ; and in the garden, now all white and hoar, that lay between the house and road, there was a mighty sun-dial, carved like a font, with noseless saints in niches, and round the rim a scripture, of which alone the words *nox venit* could be deciphered. The night *had* come, not only upon those who built and blessed such things, but on the faith which they professed. The very memory of themselves and it had faded from men's minds. Not one in ten at Mirk—where all had owned the Abbot for liege lord, and bowed their heads before his meanest monk, in token of their souls' humility, but a few centuries back—not one in ten, I say, could tell even what that niche on the south side of the communion-table meant, which the learned called *Piscina*. The mighty bower that had once been the granary of the Abbey, and to which the poor had looked with thankful eyes in times of scarcity, still stood beside the homestead, but the remembrance of its very use was gone ; the only legend clinging to its moss-grown walls was that a Long Parliament had once held its sittings there. Save the farmhouse and the barn, all relics of the past had been swept away. Immediately behind them was quite a town of stables and loose boxes, all of the most modern construction, and furnished with the latest inventions for equine comfort. The enormous farmyard, strewn with a thick carpet of clean straw, was now the exercising-ground for the horses ; but in the summer, a gate at the back of the premises opened immediately upon the grassy upland, the proximity of which had tempted Mr. Tite Chifney to pitch his tent and enlarge his boundaries at the Abbey Farm. So high had been the rent he offered for this eligible situation, that the late Sir Robert had removed his own agricultural

head-quarters elsewhere, and suffered Mr. Chifney and his race-horses to occupy the whole place, which was now the capital of the Houwhyhims—the largest establishment in Great Britain, wherein man held the secondary position, and the horse the principal.





CHAPTER VI.

THE RACING-STABLE.

Twas Mr. Chifney in person who admitted Walter Lisgard, after a precautionary glance at him through a little grating, which doubtless the monks had used for a similar purpose, although without the same excuse, for they had never possessed any Derby "cracks" to be poisoned. Mr. Chifney might have been himself a monk but for his apparel, which, although scrupulously neat and plain, fitted him almost like war-paint, so that there was not a crease to be seen, except at the knees, of which he made as much use as the holy fathers themselves did, though not precisely in the same way. His dark hair was closely cropped, and a little bald spot on the top of the crown might well have been taken for a tonsure. Moreover, he had a grave and secretive look, which would have well enough become one in whom were reposed the secrets of the Confessional; and when he smiled, he looked sorry for it immediately afterwards, as though he had given way to a carnal pleasure.

Captain Lisgard shook the trainer's hand with his usual hearty warmth, and Mr. Chifney returned his pressure with unwonted cordiality. He was accustomed to meet men of a much higher social rank than his present visitor on something like equal terms; many of them

shook hands with him ; all of them treated him with familiarity. The turf, like the grave, levels all distinctions. Between the lord and the blackleg (to make an antithetical use of terms that are not seldom synonymous), there is but slight partition on that common ground ; the widest gulf of social difference is bridged over, *pro tem.*, by the prospect of an advantageous bet. How much more, then, was this wont to be the case in view of the trustworthy “information” which Mr. Tite Chifney had it so often in his power to bestow ? Marquises had taken his arm in a confidential manner before now in the most public places, and dukes had called him “Tite ;” even ladies of the highest fashion had treated him to pretty speeches, and to what they hoped might turn out literally “winning ways.” But the great trainer estimated all these condescensions at their true value. He never concealed from himself the motives that caused these people to be so civil to him ; and perhaps he had seen too much of the turfite aristocracy to be flattered by their attentions, even had they been disinterested. But Walter Lissard’s greeting was different from those which he was wont to receive from his great patrons ; there was not only a cordial frankness about it, but a something of sympathy, conveyed with marvellous tact, in his air and manner ; which seemed to say : “I unfeignedly regret that anything like friendship should be impossible between us, for I am your social superior ; and yet, how ridiculous a thing it is that this should be so. I, but the younger brother of a man himself of no great position, and you, at the head of that profession in which the noblest in the land take so great and personal an interest.” If Mr. Chifney did not read all this, it is certain that so acute an observer could not fail to read some of it. He was as far from being moved by any considerations not strictly practical as any man connected with horseflesh ; his calling, too, rendered him as suspicious of his fellow-creatures as a police detective ; but Master Walter’s sort of flattery was too subtle for him. He had always had a liking for this

genial young fellow, with his handsome face and pleasant speech, and who, moreover, rode across country like a centaur ; he was one of his own landlord's family, too, and the heir-presumptive of the property, whose favour it was just as well to win and keep ; and lastly, the lad had been so unfeignedly grateful to him for the little hints he had occasionally afforded him, as well as so wisely reticent about his informant, that he was not unwilling to help him again to a few "fivers," if he could do so without the betrayal of professional confidence.

"Come for another 'tip,' eh, Master Walter?" whispered he good-naturedly as he led the way into the house. "You see I did not deceive you the last time you were here about *Cambyses*!"

"No, indeed, you did not, Mr. Chifney" (Walter never addressed this friend of his without the *Mister*), "and a very great blessing it was to yours thankfully at a time when he was even more hard-up than usual. Is your Derby 'crack' visible to-day? I am poor, but honest. I have no motive beyond that of curiosity, and if suspected of a concealed weapon, will submit to be searched."

"Well, Master Walter," grinned the trainer, "I can't say that I much credit the honesty of anybody myself; but I don't see why you should not have a look at his majesty, particularly as there is one coming here this morning already upon the same errand, and I'm sure I'd as soon oblige you as him—or, indeed, as any man, let it be who it will."

"You are very kind to say so, Mr. Chifney, and still more to mean it, as I am sure you do; but I feel that I have no right with my bagatelle of a stake depending upon the matter to take up your time—nay, I must insist upon throwing my cigar away before entering your house; it is all very well for Mrs. Chifney to give *you* the privilege of smoking within doors, but I could not venture to take such a liberty myself. What a jolly place this is of yours! I always think it is so much snugger than the

Abbey. I should never sit anywhere but in your grand old kitchen if I were you."

"Well, the fact is we *do* sit a good deal in the kitchen," returned Mr. Chifney reddening. "It's warm, you see, although its large, and my wife likes to see how things are going on. She's engaged there just at present, and—you're a great favourite of hers ; but I would recommend you to step in as you *go out*, instead of now. A queer thing is woman, Master Walter, and no man can tell how queer till he comes to be married ! Young gals is all sweetness and easily cajoled ; but wives—oh lor ! Now, it's exactly different with horseflesh, for the brood-mares one *can* manage with a little care, and it's only the fillies that give us trouble, and have such tempers of their own. There ; that's a Derby nag, *Blue Ruin*, in the clothes yonder, and I believe the duke would not sell him for three thousand pounds ; but I have told His Grace, as I tell you, that I wouldn't back the horse even for a place."

"A splendid stepper, too," exclaimed Walter admiringly, as the beautiful creature paced slowly round the straw-yard, with arching neck and distended nostrils, as though he were aware of the trainer's depreciating remarks, and could afford to despise them.

"That's true," rejoined Mr. Chifney drily ; "but we don't want steppers, but goers ; there's a vast of steppers in this world, both men and horses. Now in that box yonder, there is an animal who, in my opinion, could give *Blue Ruin* ten pounds ; but you shall judge for yourself presently. *The King's* palace is this next one."

And truly, scarce could horse be better housed than was his equine majesty. No light-house could be more exquisitely clean ; no drawing-room in Mayfair more neat, or better suited to the requirements of its inhabitant, although of ornament, save the plaited straw that fringed the royal couch, there was nothing. A dim religious light pervaded this sanctuary, which was kept at a moderate temperature by artificial means, while an ad-

mirable ventilation prevented the slightest "smell of the stable" from being perceptible. The object of all this consideration was a magnificent bay horse, by rule of Liliput, very fitly named *The King*, since, if not a head taller than his fellows, he was fully "a hand." His coat quite shone amid the gloom, and as the key turned in the door, he pricked his long fine ears, and turned his full eyes upon his two visitors inquiringly, with far more expression in his lean-jawed face than is possessed by many a human creature.

"This gives the world assurance of a horse indeed," muttered Walter to himself as he contemplated this wonder. "Show me his faults, Mr. Chifney, for his excellences dazzle me."

"Well, Sir," whispered the trainer, looking up towards a square hole in the ceiling, "it is not for me to depreciate 'the crack';' and there's a boy up yonder—for the horse is never left for a moment, night or day—who is getting too sharp to live, at least in my stables. But look at what he stands on."

Most men who ride think it a disgrace not to know all about a horse. Every man who keeps a pony thinks himself qualified to "pick" out the winner from any number of thoroughbreds before "the start;" and when the race is over, protests that he *had* picked him out in his own mind, only something (not quite satisfactorily explained) made him distrust his own judgment, and back a loser.

It was a great temptation to Captain Walter Lisdard, of the 104th Light Dragoons, to show himself horse-wise, but he put it from him manfully, or rather with strength of mind far beyond that of most men of his class. "The pasterns seem to be long and strong enough," answered he, "and the feet neither too large nor too small."

"Just what my lord says," observed the trainer in the same low tones; "nor can I make him see that there is any degree of contraction. But he is not *your* horse, so tell me; look now—is it not so?"

It was so, or at least it seemed to be so to the captain, as the trainer returned the faulty member to its proprietor, with the air of a banker declining a forged cheque.

"It is of small consequence to me," said Walter; "but I shall be sorry if the winner does not come out of your stable. I took a thousand to twenty in October, which I can now hedge to great advantage."

"If you take my advice, you will hold on," said Mr. Chifney confidentially. "Twenty pounds is little to lose, and what I have shown you by no means destroys his chance; moreover, *The King* will not be deposed in the betting. I shall be surprised if, in the paddock, they lay more than three to one."

"You were going to tell me something, Mr. Chifney, only you thought better of it," said Captain Lisdard, laying his finger upon the other's coat-cuff, as they emerged from the royal presence. "And yet you trusted me when I was but a boy at school, and I never abused your confidence."

"What a fellow you are to read a chap!" returned the trainer admiringly. "Burst my buttons, but you are a cunning one, Master Walter. It was true that I was thinking of letting you into a little secret—though after all, it mayn't be worth much. Let us come on to the ten-gallop for five minutes, for nowhere else can we get out of earshot of these boys." With that, passing through a paddock, itself provided with a straw-ride, so that the race-horses need not set foot upon the frost-bound turf as they issued forth to exercise, Mr. Chifney led the way to the upland, where a broad brown road of tan was permanently laid on the level down. Here the trainer paused, and speaking aloud for the first time, observed in a solemn tone: "Now, look you, true as fate, I would tell no other man but you. What I said about *The King's* feet was on the square: but that aint all. There's a horse here as nobody ever heard of, and yet who's a real good un. He's the one that I said could give *Blue Ruin* ten pounds. You may get two hundred to one against

him at this blessed moment, and he'll be at twenty to one before April Fool Day. It's the best thing we've had at Mirk yet, and— Ah, the devil ! here comes the man I was expecting ; remember we were talking about *The King.*"

"Morning, Mr. Chifney," said the new-comer, nodding familiarly to the trainer. "And morning to *you*, Sir, if you aint too proud to accept it."

He was a large-built middle-aged man, with a sunburnt countenance, generally good-humoured enough, notwithstanding the presence of a truculent red beard, but upon this occasion somewhat sullen, and even defiant. Walter recognised in him the stranger stopping at the *Lisgard Arms*, at once, and was at no loss to account for his displeasure. He had doubtless received some hint that his presence at the Abbey would not be welcome.

"Good-morning, Mr. Derrick," returned the captain cheerfully. "There's no pride about me, since, unfortunately, I have nothing to be proud of ; but if there was, why should I not return a civil reply to a civil speech ?"

"Oh, because I aint good enough to speak to," answered the other scornfully. "Because I aint a gentleman, forsooth, like your high and mighty family. But the fact is, Sir, although I have got decent blood in my veins myself, I come from a country where we don't care *that*"—and he snapped his fingers with a noise equal to the crack of a whip—"for who is a man's father, unless the man himself is worth his salt."

"That, then, must have been the reason why this good-for-nothing ruffian left that country," thought the captain ; but he answered with humility : "Then, I fear, I should be giving up my best chance if I went there."

"Well," answered the stranger, somewhat mollified. "you don't speak like one of them beastly aristocrats—that I will say—as though it were too much trouble to open their darned lips."

Mr. Derrick himself did not speak like an aristocrat either; his voice, though rich in song, had in speech a strong northern burr, which rescued it from any such imputations. "Why, if a man in my country," continued he, "should venture to warn another off his land—unless, of course, it was a mining claim—as Sir Richard Lisgard——"

"Mr. Derrick," interrupted the captain firmly, "I am sure that it is not the custom in any country in the world to abuse a man's brother to his face. Having said that much, I will add that, if you have received any rudeness from anyone at the Abbey, I am sincerely sorry for it. It did not emanate from *me*. Mr. Chifney here will give me a character so far."

"Master Walter is as civil-spoken and well-behaved a young gentleman as any in the county," exclaimed the trainer warmly; "and I will go bail has never given you or any man offence. He has just stepped in, like you, to see 'the crack,' on which he has a little money; and since I am not one of those who say: 'It is no use nowadays to attempt to take in your enemies, and therefore your friends must suffer,' I have been giving him some advice."

"About *Manylaws?*" inquired the stranger suspiciously, turning sharp round upon the captain.

The look of blank astonishment upon that gallant officer's face would have set at rest the doubts of a Pollaky.

"It is not my habit to disclose my customers' secrets," observed the trainer tartly; "although I may say that, with Master Walter, everything is as safe as wax."

"Is it so?" quoth Mr. Derrick warmly. "Then let him come with us and see the Black.—Only mind, Mr. Walter Lisgard, I will not have that brother of yours bettered by a fourpenny-piece by anything you may see or hear to-day."

"My brother never bets upon any race," answered the captain quietly; "so that promise is easily given."

"Then come along with me and Mr. Chifney," said the stranger, holding out his hairy hand in token of amity. "You've read a deal about that crack as I've just been looking at ; but I dare say, now, you have never so much as heard of this same *Manylaws*."

"Not unless you mean the French horse, about which there were a few lines in *Bell* some time ago—*Menelaus*."

"Ay, that's him. But it's called *Manylaws*," explained Mr. Derrick ; "for you wouldn't think of calling the Oaks' mare *Antigown*, I suppose, *Antigone*. Well, the Black aint fancied much, I reckon ; but he *will* be, Mr. Chifney, eh ? He *will* be?"

"It is my opinion that he will be at very short odds indeed," returned the trainer ; "and many more people will be desirous of paying him a call than do him that honour just at present. This is his stable. He does not look quite such a likely horse as *The King*, Master Walter, does he ? There's bone for you !"

"An ounce of blood is worth a pound of bone, says the proverb," remarked the captain.

"So far as that goes, although he *is* a Frenchman," answered the trainer, "he has Godolphin's blood in his veins. But only look at his ragged hips !"

"Ragged enough, Mr. Chifney. And do you mean to say that this animal will be a public favourite ?"

"We hope not," returned the trainer, winking facetiously at his bearded friend ; "but—— Shall we tell him what we *do* hope, Mr. Derrick ?"

"I'll tell him myself," quoth the other impulsively, "for you say the young gentleman is safe, and I have taken a sort of unaccountable fancy to him. We hope, and more than that, believe, Captain Lisgard, that that same ragged-hipped horse will win the Derby !"

"Two hundred to one against Mr. Blanquette's *Menelaus*," murmured Walter pathetically, as though it were a line from some poem of the affections.

"That's the present quotation," answered Mr. Derrick with a chuckle, and rattling a quantity of loose silver and

gold in his breeches' pockets. "Perhaps you would like to lay it in ponies with Mr. Chifney and me."

"No, Mr. Derrick; but I should like to thank you very much for letting me into this secret, which, I assure you, shall never pass my lips;" and he held out his hand to the stranger.

"Our way lies together as far as the inn," returned the other warmly; "we'll liquor—— But there; I forgot I was no longer in Cariboo. I dare say a gentleman like you *don't* liquor so early in the day."

"At all events, I will walk with you, my good Sir," answered the captain laughing; and so, forgetting to repeat his request to be permitted to pay his respects to the trainer's wife, he took his departure with his new acquaintance.

"And who *is* this Monsieur Blanquette?" inquired Walter carelessly as they walked down the village street.

"He was a mate of mine at the gold-diggings in British Columbia, and the only Frenchman as ever I saw there. We did a pretty good stroke of work together; and when we came home, he invested his money in horseflesh, and that there *Manylaws* was one of his cheapest bargains."

"I think I saw it stated somewhere that Mr. Blanquette is only part-owner of the horse?" observed the captain inquiringly.

"That's *so*," rejoined the other. "It belongs to him and a company."

"And you are the company, eh, Mr. Derrick?"

"You have hit it," responded the bearded man with the air of a proprietor. "This here child is the *Co.* in question."



CHAPTER VII.

A BROKEN FRIENDSHIP.

WEEKS and months have passed by at Mirk Abbey ; the snow has thawed, and the cold winds of March have done their worst, and the spring is clothing nature's nakedness with garments of green. Yet all this time, my lady, who is so fond of outdoor exercise, even in rough weather, and such a constant visitor of the poor, has never been seen beyond the park gates. To be sure, she has had more to keep her within than usual, for the captain not only got his leave prolonged at the beginning of the year, but came home for three weeks very shortly after, and is at Mirk again at the present time. Miss Rose Aynton, too, a very nice young lady, and most attentive to her hostess, seems to have become quite a resident at the Abbey, for, with the exception of a week's absence in London, she has remained there since Christmas, her departure having indeed been vaguely fixed more than once, but only to be as indefinitely postponed. It is now understood that she will certainly stay over the festivities attendant upon Sir Richard's coming of age in June. The baronet himself, who, his detractors say, always prefers the country, where he is somebody, to town, where baronets are plentiful, has scarcely been away at all. He writes to inquiring friends in London,

most of whom happen to have marriageable daughters, that he is immersed in business connected with the estate, and cannot leave Mirk at present. Mr. Kinkel, the agent, however, has seen no cause to relax his ordinary exertions, in consequence of this new-born application of the young gentleman to his own affairs; and Walter wickedly asserts that his brother is in reality occupied with no other business whatever save that of keeping the man Derrick from trespassing upon the Abbey lands. He is very glad, he says, that Richard has at last found an object in life, and hopes that, like the French sportsman's woodcock, it will last him for a good long time.

It does not help to heal the breach between the brothers that Walter and this same man have grown very intimate, a fact which Sir Richard (assuming to himself a metaphor usually applied only to Providence) stigmatises as "flying in his face."—His mother, however, declines to take this view of it—declines even to express an opinion about it one way or another, and avoids the subject as much as she can. Even with the confidential maid, notwithstanding her decision about Mr. Derrick's ineligibility as a suitor, she forbears to reason with respect to this matter, although it is understood that the forbidden swain is gaining ground in the affections of Mistress Forest. There is but one person to whom my lady has opened her lips concerning the man she dimly saw by lantern-light on Christmas Eve, and has never seen since. Her confidant—if one can be called so to whom so little was confided—is Mr. Arthur Haldane, the only son of the doctor, and one who has been a great favourite with Lady Lisgard from his youth up, not for his own sake merely, although he is honest and kind, and very winning with those who look beyond externals (for he is not good-looking, or, at least, does not appear so by contrast with her own handsome sons), but for another reason; my lady owed him a reparation of love for a wrong that she had inadvertently done his father.

Dr. Haldane and the late Sir Robert had been at

school together, and their boy-friendship had lasted, as it seldom does, through their university course. Their mutual esteem had not afterwards suffered by propinquity, when they came to pass their days within a few hundred yards of one another ; and when my lady married, she found that the dearest friend her husband had on earth was Dr. Haldane. She was not the woman to come between her husband's friends and himself : and the doctor (who had had his doubts about the matter before he came to know her) was wont to declare the Abbey was even more of a second home to him than it used to be, now that his old friend had placed so charming a mistress at the head of it. He was always welcome there, and being himself a widower, was glad to take advantage of Sir Robert's hospitality whenever he could ; a knife and fork were laid for him at table all the year round ; and when he did not appear at the dinner-hour, either husband or wife was sure to observe : "I am afraid we shall not see the doctor with us to-day." It would have seemed as though nothing short of death could have interrupted such cordiality as this.

But in those days there was such a thing as politics. The baronet was a Tory, and his friend a Whig of what was afterwards called "advanced opinions." They bickered over their wine three nights out of every seven, though they never failed to drink each other's healths before they sought the company of the hostess. These political discussions (unfortunately, as it turned out) were scrupulously confined to the dining-room, so that my lady had no idea of the strength of the respective prejudices of the combatants, and of the severity of the trial to which their friendship was so often subjected. Brought up as she had been among persons in humble life, who were engaged in bread-winning (a very monopolising occupation), and educated in France, where the question of English reform was never mooted, she knew little or nothing of the matters which formed the subjects of dispute, although they were setting half England together by

the ears. It seems strange to read of now, but the idol which Toryism had set up to worship at that epoch was a heartless and vulgar fop, whom it sycophantically dubbed the First Gentleman in Europe; while the Whigs pinned their faith upon the virtue of his wife, a woman as vulgar as himself, and whom her enemies endeavoured to show was almost as vicious. Over this good-for-nothing pair, Lords, Commons, and People were quarrelling together, like a mob at a dog-fight, and the public press was solely occupied with hounding them on. To dip into a newspaper of that date is to make an excursion to Billingsgate, for both parties, equally unable to whitewash their candidate, confined themselves to vilifying their opponent.

When the report upon the bill of Pains and Penalties against Queen Caroline was finally approved by a majority of nine only, and those nine representing the votes of the ministers themselves, the popular excitement culminated. The Whigs decreed that there should be illuminations throughout the kingdom, and (what seems hard) that their adversaries should express the same satisfaction in a similar manner. For three consecutive nights, the Londoners made plain the innocence of their queen, so far as pyrotechnics and oil-lamps could do it; and for one night, the country was expected to do the like. Vast mobs paraded the streets of the provincial towns, to see that this was done, and even made excursions to the country-houses of the disaffected. Among others, Mirk Abbey was threatened with a visitation of this sort; and I must confess that the doctor rather chuckled over the notion, that the stubborn Sir Robert, who had called his sovereign lady so many opprobrious epithets, would have to dedicate his candles to her, as though she were his patron saint. The baronet, on his part, protested that every window in his house should be broken rather than exhibit so much as a farthing-dip; but he said nothing to his wife about the matter, lest it should make her nervous.

They happened to be engaged to pass that November

week at a friend's house in the country, and left home accordingly. The gentleman with whom they stayed himself suffered some inconvenience from the rioters on the night in question ; and when Sir Robert came back, he was even less inclined to be a convert to his Whig friend's opinions than before.

"But you *did* illuminate," said the doctor with a chuckle, as they sat together after dinner, as usual, upon the day of his return.

"I did nothing of the kind, Sir," returned the baronet angrily.

"Well, your servants did it for you, then, and I presume by your orders. Mr. Brougham himself could not have exhibited his patriotism more significantly. The Abbey was a blaze of light from basement to garret."

"That is a lie !" cried Sir Robert, making the glasses jump with the force with which he brought his fist down upon the table.

"A what ?" exclaimed the doctor, rising from the table livid with rage. "Do you, then, call me a liar ?"

"Yes," thundered the baronet; "like all your Radical crew."

The two men that had so long been nearer and dearer to each other than brothers never again interchanged one word.

Dr. Haldane left the Abbey, solemnly protesting that he would never cross its threshold again during the lifetime of its owner ; and he kept his determination even in the hour when his old friend lay a-dying.

Now, poor Lady Lisgard was the person to blame for all this. Before Sir Robert and she had set out on their visit, the housekeeper had told her that everybody was going to illuminate their houses on the 12th, on account of what had happened in London with respect to Queen Caroline ; and she was afraid that if some sign of rejoicing was not shown at the Abbey, the mob would do some damage. A candle in each of the windows would save a hundred pounds of mischief belike. "Well, then, put a

candle," said my lady, not dreaming that by that simple order she was wounding her husband in his most vital point, his pride, and making a sacrifice of principles that he held only second to those of the Christian religion. She did not even think it necessary to tell him that she had left this command behind her; but when she heard him praise the determination of the friend with whom they stayed, not to submit to the dictation of the rabble, she had not the heart to tell him of the mistake she had committed, and which it was by that time too late to remedy. That mistake, and, still more, her unfortunate reticence, had caused the quarrel, destined never to be healed, betwixt her husband and his friend. They both forgave her, but she could not forgive herself. It seemed to her that she could never do enough to show how sorry she was for her grievous fault. We have said how she made up so far as was in her power, in love and duty to Sir Robert, for the loss of his friend; but to that friend himself, self-exiled from her roof, and out of the reach, as it were, of reparation, how was she to atone for the wrong she had inadvertently done him? When the quarrel first took place, the doctor's wrath was quite unquenchable; he would listen to nothing except an apology—a debt which Sir Robert (although he certainly owed it) most resolutely refused to pay. The doctor, who had hitherto confined his Whiggism to after-dinner eloquence, and coarse but biting epigrams, which had earned him the reputation of a philosopher with those of his own party, thereupon became an active political partisan, and not only voted at election-time, but canvassed with might and main against the Lisgard interest; nay, he even composed, as we have ventured to hint, satirical ballads against the paternal rule of that respectable family.

But although neither sex nor age was spared in those savage days, not one word did the vengeful doctor breathe about my lady; nay, it was on record that when some too uncompromising apostle of liberty had reflected upon her humble extraction in the presence of that friend

estranged, he had risen to his full height of five feet eight, and levelled the slanderer to the earth. Perhaps my lady did not esteem him the less upon that account ; but certain it was that the first visit she paid after Sir Robert's death was to the doctor's house, taking with her, it was said, from her husband's dying lips, a message of affectionate reconciliation. The baronet had never brought himself to alter the words in his will by which he had appointed his tried and loving friend, Bartholomew Haldane, trustee for his children ; and of course the doctor accepted his trust. He never could be induced to visit the Abbey, although his oath no longer forbade it ; but the Lisgard children were his constant guests, and his only son, Arthur Haldane, was as another brother to them, and almost as another son to my lady. His nature was grave and serious, like Sir Richard's, but very tender withal, and she felt that she could confide in him what she could not have confided to the rigid young baronet, although he was her own flesh and blood ; nevertheless, or perhaps for that very reason, when she took Arthur's arm that April morning, upon pretence of showing him some alterations that were proposed to be made at a place in the Abbey-grounds called the "Watersmeet," she thought it necessary to preface what she was going to say to him with an explanation.

" My dear Arthur," said she, when they had got out of view of the house, " you will think it cruel that I have brought you away from the society of that charming young lady, Miss Aynton, to chat with an old woman like me, who have boys of my own to take counsel with ; but the fact is, I have inveigled you hither to get an opinion from you which I could scarcely ask of your learned brother."

This was conferring a brevet rank upon Sir Richard, who had not yet been called to the Bar, although he was reading for it ; while Arthur had been in practice for some years.

" My dear Lady Lisgard," returned the other smiling, " I must, for my professional credit's sake, enter my pro-

test against what you say about Miss Aynton, as irrelevant, and travelling out of the record, but besides that, it is a delusion which I should be sorry to see you entertain. Miss Aynton is nothing whatever to me ; although, indeed, if she were, I would rather chat with you than with any young lady (save one) in Christendom."

The young barrister's tone was so unnecessarily earnest and impressive, that one so acute as Lady Lisgard could scarcely have failed to see that he courted inquiry concerning such excess of zeal. She either saw it not, however, or refused to see it ; and he was far too delicate by nature to press it upon her attention. "And now, *ma mère*," continued he, taking her hand in his affectionately, "in what way can I be of use to you ?"

"By your good sense, and by your good feeling, Arthur. I need the aid of your talents and your virtues, too, dear boy ; I want your best advice, and then your promise that you will never disclose that I have asked it."

"You shall have both those, *ma mère*. As the pashas say to the sultan when there is nothing to fear : 'I bring you my head ;' as for my heart—that has been devoted to you these many years."





CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE WATERSMEET.

ADY LISGARD and her young friend had by this time arrived at the Watersmeet, a lovely spot, where the river branched into two streams, the one still pursuing its course through the Lisgard property, and the other escaping under a sort of swing palisade—which prevented the passage of boats—into public life. The way had lain for some time along a broad beech-walk, paved with an exquisite checker-work of light and shade ; but they now came upon an open spot on which a rustic bench was placed for those who would admire at leisure what was called the home-view. The prospect from this seat was remarkable, since it took in all that was best worth seeing at Mirk, without laying under contribution anything, with the exception of the church, that was not the property of the family. Two sides of the Abbey, an irregular but very picturesque structure, could from here be seen, at a distance not so great as to lose the bolder features of the architecture, or to mass the ivy which Time had hung about the southern front ; the sloping lawn, with its marble fountain, and alcove of trellis-work, which the spring-time had but sparingly clothed with leaf ; the boat-house, with its carved and gilded roof—all these, backed by a living wall of stately woods, made up a charming picture. The park lay across the stream, which, although both broad and

deep, was only used by pleasure-boats ; and above the one-arched bridge which linked it with the hither bank beyond the lawn, stood up the gray church tower. Gazing upon this view, not as one who had seen it a thousand times before, and might behold it as often again, but with eyes that had a strange yearning and regret in them, Lady Lisgard thus addressed her companion.

“I want to speak to you about my Walter, Arthur. A mother, alas ! cannot know her son as his friend knows him ; and you, I believe, are Walter’s truest friend——”

“One moment, Lady Lisgard,” interrupted the young man gravely ; “everybody is Walter’s friend, but some are his flatterers. I must tell you at once that he is displeased with me at present because I am not one of those.”

“Yes ; you have warned him of some danger, and he is piqued because he thinks that is treating him as a child.”

“Since you know that, *ma mère*, you know all that is necessary to be said. Go on.”

“What is the bond, Arthur, that links my Walter to this person Derrick ? I pray you, do not hesitate to tell me. There is more depends upon your answer than you can possibly guess.”

“Really, Lady Lisgard,” returned the young man hesitatingly, “you ask a difficult thing, and in truth, a delicate. There are some things, as you say, which a son does not tell his mother, and far less wishes to have told to her by another. Women and men take such different views of the same matter. If men are vicious—which I do not deny—in their love of horse-racing, for instance, women reprobate it in an exaggerated way.”

“Horse-racing !” murmured Lady Lisgard, clasping her hands. “Does my Walter bet ? Is he a gambler ?”

“I did not say that,” answered the young man with irritation. “If you insist upon making me a tale-bearer, Lady Lisgard, do not at least heighten the colour of my scandals.”

“ I beg your pardon, Arthur ; I was wrong. Perhaps this eagerness to suspect the worst is the cause of that distrust which the young entertain of the old. And yet *he* might have told me all, and been sure of forgiveness.”

“ Doubtless, *ma mère*; but then we don’t tell our mothers all. Now, pray, be reasonable, and assure yourself that Walter is no worse than other young men, because he makes up a book upon the Derby.”

“ You do not do so, Arthur. Why should Walter ?”

“ I do not, *ma mère*, because my taste does not lie in that direction. My vices—and I have plenty—are of another sort. I unsettle my mind with heterodox publications. I entertain opinions which are subversive of the principles of good government as believed in by your ladyship’s family. You know in what sort of faith I have been brought up. Moreover, I live in town among a slow, hard-working set, who have neither time nor inclination for going to race-courses ; and, indeed, I am now getting a little practice at the bar myself. If I were a handsome young swell in a regiment of Light Dragoons, then, instead of publishing that amusing work upon the *Law of Entail*, which, with a totally inexcusable pang, I saw lying upon your library-table to-day *uncut*, I should without doubt be making a betting-book. Having no call towards that sort of employment, however, I am very severe upon it. I term it waste of time, loss of money, &c. ; and in the case of your son, I have even been so foolish as to remonstrate with him on that very account—an interference which, I fear, has cost me his friendship.”

“ Has he lost money through this man Derrick, think you ?”

“ Not yet, or they would not be upon such good terms. A turf friendship ceases at the first bad bet. The fact is, it was about his intimacy with this drunken fellow that I ventured to speak ; it increases the misunderstanding already unhappily existing between your sons ; for you know what a dislike Sir Richard has shown for this person,

while for Walter himself I believe him to be a most dangerous acquaintance."

"Dangerous?" inquired my lady hurriedly—"how mean you dangerous?"

"He is bad company for any young man, and he has acquaintances who are worse. Walter is 'hail-fellow-well-met' with everybody, and may find himself one day so deeply involved with these folks, that extrication may not be easy. He has plenty of wits, and well knows how to take care of himself in a general way: but all his great advantages are useless to him among this particular class. His genial wit, his graceful ways, his tenderness of heart —nay, even his high spirits, all go for nothing with such vulgar good-for-naughts, whom, in my opinion, he will be lucky not to find downright cheats and scoundrels."

"Is this man Derrick, then," inquired my lady, gazing fixedly upon the dark swirling stream, "irredeemably base and vicious?"

"No, not so," answered the young man frankly; "he has the lees of good still left in him, without which, indeed, he would be less harmful. Walter was taken from the first with his openness and candour—which are so great that he seems quite lost to the sense of shame—and with his lavish generosity, which is probably the result of rapid fortune making. He made five thousand pounds or so, it seems, in a few weeks at gold-digging, and I should think he was in a fair way to spend it in almost as short a period."

"Perhaps he may have been spoilt by that mode of life," observed Lady Lisgard pitifully.

"I speak as I find, *ma mère*," said the young man, shrugging his shoulders. "It is nothing to us if this man may have been a good boy at one time. You may charitably suppose, if you like, that he has been crossed in love, or unfortunately married—— Ah! that reminds you, I see, of his *tendresse* for Mistress Forest. Since it moves you so deeply, you must look that matter in the face, Lady Lisgard, and very soon, if you wish to keep

Mary. If something about this fellow pleases Walter, you need not wonder that it has fascinated your waiting-maid."

"Is it this fancy of his, then, think you, which alone keeps him here at Mirk?" asked my lady, who had started for a moment as though stung, but was now once more looking thoughtfully at the river.

"No. Being totally without anchorage in the world, the cable-strand of a partnership in a race-horse at present at Chifney's stables here holds him to the place where he can be near his property. His pecuniary affairs are, as I understand, bound up in that four-footed creature, and beyond them he has nothing to look to. You who have all things settled about you, Lady Lisgard, with home, children, and friends, and from whom so many interests radiate, are doubtless unable to picture to yourself such a state of things. But if this man should marry Mistress Forest, and still keep his share in *Menelaus*, I should not be surprised if he were to take up his residence at Mirk altogether."

"God in his mercy forbid!" ejaculated my lady, clasping her hands.

"My dear Lady Lisgard!" cried the young man, in alarm at her emotion, "I am afraid I must have said something very foolish, to have frightened you about this fellow thus. After all, there is no harm done, and I may have been very wrong—as my mind misgives me, I have been very officious—in anticipating any harm."

"No, no," cried my lady, rocking herself to and fro; "your good sense has only told you truth. Do not—do not forsake me, Arthur. I look to you not only for warning, but for succour. Are you sure that you have told me all? Is there no other reason besides those you have mentioned why this man, having lain in wait, and entrapped my Walter, should sit down before this house, and, as it were, besiege it thus?"

"Well, Lady Lisgard," returned the young man gravely, "there is, I fear, another reason; but it is one I

am very loath to speak of—— Are you cold, *ma mère?* I fear it is too early for this sitting by the river."

"No, Arthur, I am not cold. Why should you hesitate to tell me anything about this—this stranger?"

"Because, Lady Lisgard, I respect you as though you were indeed my mother—as you have shown towards me always a mother's love; and this matter in some sort concerns yourself."

"*Myself?*" whispered my lady hoarsely. "No, not myself, good Arthur. What can there be in common between this man—whom I have never seen—and me?"

"Ay, there it is," replied the young man quietly. "It would have been far better had you not shut yourself up, as you have done these three months, expressly to avoid this fellow—by that means making him think himself of consequence."

"Who says I have done that?" asked my lady vehemently. "Who dares to say it? Why should I fear him? Why should I think about him well, or ill? What is he to me, or I to him?"

"Ay, what indeed, *ma mère!* All this arises from giving ourselves such airs, and carrying matters with so high a hand; you have nothing but Sir Richard's pride to thank for it, to which I must say, in this instance, you have injudiciously, and, most unlike yourself, succumbed. It was a harsh measure, surely, to forbid this man your house, when coming, as you knew he would, upon a lawful errand of courtship; but to serve the landlord of an inn with notice of ejectment if a certain guest should not remove himself—which your eldest son has caused to be done with Steve—is a most monstrous exercise of authority. No wonder this Derrick was greatly irritated; any man so treated would be; but, in the present case, Sir Richard has made the unhappiest mistake. He is dealing with one who is to the full as obstinate as himself; and (what makes the odds overwhelmingly against him) a man entirely reckless and unprincipled. Your son does not understand how anyone can be proud

who is not a gentleman. Now, this fellow is possessed of a very devil of pride. He is come from an outlying colony, where there is conventional respect for nothing ; and where every man does pretty much what is right in his own eyes. He has been lucky there ; raised by a freak of fortune, and not by plodding industry (although he has doubtless worked hard too), to comparative wealth, he is by no means inclined to consider people his superiors. A beggar on horseback if you will, he is still *mounted*, and may ride in Rotten Row itself if it pleases him. He resents, of course, being thus meddled with ; he is one of that class who would deem it a great liberty in the law should it punish his actual transgressions— who would think it hard to be smitten for his faults—but to be interfered with in a harmless avocation, such as love-making, or to be dictated to as to where he is to reside, stirs his bile, I can imagine, pretty considerably. It is my belief that he would have got tired of Mirk and Mary too before this, and wandered off somewhere else, scattering his bank-notes on the way, poor devil, like the hare in a school-boy's paper chase, but for this unjustifiable attempt on the part of Sir Richard to curtail his liberties. I am sure, also, that Walter was at first inclined to patronise this man, for the very reason that his brother had exhibited towards him such uncalled-for animosity."

"This may be all very true," said my lady, sighing, but at the same time not without a certain air of relief ; "but I cannot understand how it affects *me*, Arthur."

"Well, you see, my dear Lady Lisgard, although Sir Richard issues these foolish edicts, it is you who are responsible for them ; and I have no doubt this Derrick has been told as much. At least, I hear that over his cups he has declared he will never leave Mirk till he has had a sight of this Queen of all the Roosias (as he terms you), who holds herself so—— Pardon me, *ma mère*, I was wrong to repeat this fellow's impertinence. Heaven help us ! Why, my lady has fainted !"

Arthur Haldane spoke the truth. For the moment, Lady Lisgard's mind was freed from all its anxieties, of whatever nature they might be. The young man sprang down the bank, and dipping his handkerchief in the stream, applied its wet folds to her forehead. Gradual and slow the lifeblood flowed again, and with it thought, although confused and tangled.

"Save me, save my Walter!" murmured she. "Tell him I will die first. He shall never look upon my face."

"He never shall, *ma mère*," said the young man soothingly, while he chafed my lady's stiffened fingers.

"Keep him away!" cried she, endeavouring to rise; "he is tearing off my wedding-ring. Help! help!"

"No, no, it is not he; it is I, Arthur Haldane—a well-meaning fool, but who has worked a deal of mischief. I have told you all I know, and I wish my tongue had been cut out first. It makes my heart bleed to see you thus distressed."

"Then give me comfort, Arthur," groaned my lady; "you have warned me well, but what is the use of warning without advice? How shall I make him cease to persecute us? Gold will not buy him. I have heard of such a man, who, being bribed, cried but the more 'Give, give;' as the whirlpool swallows ship after ship, and yet gapes for more—for navies."

"Bribe him? No, Heaven forbid! That, indeed, would be the very way to keep him what he is—to make that chronic which is now, let us hope, but a passing ailment. But I would take care, if I were you, that nothing further be done to irritate him. He may revenge himself—I only say he *may*—by doing Walter some ill turn. And, above all, you must persuade Mistress Forest to give him his *congé*. If once you get her to say 'No,' of her own free will, he will soon tire of haunting the Abbey; while, if his race-horse does not do the great things expected of him—and what race-horse ever did?—he will soon tire of Mirk itself."

My lady shook her head.

"Come, *ma mère*, there is no need for despondency about this fellow's going—nor, indeed, for much apprehension if he stays—and, moreover, I really think the matter lies in your own hands ; at all events, you have more influence over your waiting-maid than anyone else, and my advice is that you speak to her at once."

"Yes, I will speak to her," said Lady Lisgard mechanically. "Thank you, good Arthur, much." She rose from her seat, and heaving a deep sigh as she turned from the fair home-scene, was about to saunter to the beech-walk, when the young man laid his hand upon her arm. It was the lightest touch, but, like that of an enchanter's wand, it seemed to remove all trace of selfish trouble, and in its place to evoke the tenderest sympathy for another.

"You wish to speak to me upon your own account, dear boy ; and, alas ! I know the subject you would choose."

"*Alas, ma mère !* why *alas ?* I want to talk to you about your Letty."

"Not, now, not now," cried Lady Lisgard. "Spare me, dear Arthur, for this time ; I feel so unhinged and woe-stricken, I can give you neither 'Yea' nor 'Nay.'"

"I hoped that you would not have thought of 'Nay,' dear Lady Lisgard," said the young man pathetically. "I did not look for the same cruel arguments of difference of station and the like from *you* as from—others. I shall have a home to offer your daughter such as will be wanting in no comfort, although it may not be one so fair as yonder Abbey. My professional prospects are, I am glad to say—"

"It is not *that*, dear boy," broke in Lady Lisgard hastily. "You should know me better than to suppose so, Arthur ; yet I cannot, nay, I dare not tell you what it is. It may be you will hear the truth some day, though never from these lips ; it may be—I pray Heaven for that—that you will never need to hear it. But for the present, press me for no reply ; for when you ask to be

my daughter's husband, Arthur Haldane, you know not what you ask."

"That is what Sir Richard says," replied the young man bitterly. "The Lisgards are such an ancient race, their blood so pure, their scutcheon—"

"Spare me, spare me, Arthur!" cried my lady earnestly. "Give me only time, and I will do my best. If I have said anything to wound you, ah! forgive it for the sake of those old times, which you may think of some day, boy, not without tears, when I shall be to you but a memory. Think then—whatever's said—'Well, she was always kind to me; and when I wooed her daughter (you will own) she was kind too, although I did not think so then.' My lady's face was hidden in her hands, but through the fair white fingers, as though the diamonds in her rings had started from their sockets, oozed the large tears.

"Dear Lady Lisgard, good, kind friend, *ma mère*," exclaimed the young man, deeply moved, "what sorrow is it which overwhelms you thus? I pray you let me share it. I am young and strong, and I love you and yours, and there is help in me. Come, let me try."

"No, Arthur, no," answered my lady gravely, as she once more arose, and re-entered the beech-walk. "I must bear my own burden—that is only right and fitting. Heaven knows I am willing to suffer to the uttermost, if I be only permitted to suffer alone. It is when the innocent suffer for us that the burden galls the most. No; you can do nothing for me but keep silence about all that we have spoken of to-day. Not to do so, would be to do me a grievous hurt. You have passed your word, Arthur Haldane—remember that."

"Yes, *ma mère*," replied the young man sighing. "The Haldanes always keep their promises, you know."



CHAPTER IX.

IN THE LIBRARY.

GF all the pleasant rooms—and they were many—that were to be found at Mirk Abbey, the library was by far the most charming. An architect might have said that the rest of the house had been somewhat sacrificed to it; a bookworm might have wished it gloomier and more retired; but for a lover of literature who was also a judge of beauty, it was well-nigh perfect. It was upon the first floor, and occupied the space of at least three reception-rooms. Long as it was, its excessive breadth might have been objected to, but that the effect of this was diminished to exactly the right proportions by huge double bookcases, which jutted out at right angles from the walls; thus the place was broken up, as it were, into a number of little studies, closed in upon three sides, but open, of course, towards what in a church would be called the aisle. This aisle, still a broad space, was set alternately with flower-vases and statues of white marble, though none of these were so tall as to hide from one standing at the door the view of the huge painted window at the southern end. In summer-time, this window was swung back, and all the garden scents and drowsy sounds—the level sweep of the scythe upon the lawn, and the murmur of the bees in the limes—were suffered to enter in. In winter, being closed, what light there was came glowing through the pictured

panes, or through small windows far above the level of the eye, so that, in that well-warmed room, you could not tell that it *was* winter.

And yet this stately apartment was seldom used in either season. Letty would sometimes take a godly book from that part of the place marked in dull gold *Devotional*, but always carried it away to read in her own chamber; and Sir Richard now and then would refresh himself in the topographical department by taking down the *History of Wheatshire*, where all the Family Seats were duly pictured, and the linked sweetness of the genealogy of the owners long drawn out; but the Lisgards were not a reading race. Moreover, when they did read, it was chiefly out of modern books temporarily supplied by Mr. Mudie, or works most glorious to behold as to their bindings, and without which no lady's drawing-room can be said to be complete, but which happily are rarely seen in libraries. My lady herself had a goodly store of books in her own boudoir, including most of the French and English classics, all presented to her at divers times by her late husband, and all read, if not for her own pleasure, then for his; she therefore visited the library more rarely than anyone except Walter, who would as soon have thought of visiting the laundry. The last time she had gone thither was just after Miss Aynton's first arrival, when she had taken that young lady to see some curious missals therè deposited, containing certain initial letters which Rose was desirous of copying.

She enters it now alone upon her return from that interview with Arthur Haldane at the Watersmeet—on a very different errand. She is no longer the kind of somewhat stately hostess, doing her young guest a pleasure, and at the same time perhaps taking a pardonable pride in showing her the gem of the Abbey—its library—for the first time. All pride, all stateliness, seem to have departed from that anxious face; her figure, however, is erect as of old, and her step as firm, as she closes the door of the vast room behind her, and walks towards its

southern end. She looks neither to left nor right, for she is in search of none of those volumes which line the library on either side. The place for which she is bound is in a far corner next the window, but very indirectly lighted by it; a small "study," where, if such a thing as dust were permitted to accumulate at the Abbey at all, it would certainly lie; and where it did lie; a spot unvisited for years, ever since it had been determined that Sir Richard's profession should be the Law, when certain books were taken from it, and carried up to town to stock his chambers; for over this little literary den was written Legal. Truly, as the phrase goes, "it was not a place for a lady," that dusky little chamber, lined with its bulky, calf-bound volumes, mostly in series, and often as not connected with one another by that emblem of their contents, a spider's web. What could my lady have come hither to cull from such unpromising books? Is it possible that, unmindful of the proverb, that he who is his own lawyer has got a fool for his client, she can be in search of legal advice gratis? It is plain that she is in doubt, alas, even where to find the information of which she is in search. Her soft white hand wanders from tome to tome, and drags down one after another from its dusty shelf, until she has peopled the sunbeams anew with motes; but her large gray eyes find nothing to arrest them as they wander over the arid pages, although they grow weary with their task.

At last, however, they seem to have been more fortunate. For the first time, my lady takes her seat beside the slanting desk, and with her head supported by her hands, like one who is in need of all her wits, she reads on patiently enough. She cons the matter over twice or thrice, then sighs, and putting a thin slip of paper in the book to mark the place, returns it to its shelf, and pursues her search as before. Out of several score of volumes, four only seem to have served her purpose, and even from them it is evident that she has gleaned no comfort, but rather confirmation of

some fear. Her face is more hopeless than it was a while ago ; her sigh—and she sighs deep and often—has despair in it, as well as sorrow. From her wearied eyes, as she gazes upon the opened casement—through which comes a dreamy music in the flutter of the young leaves on a neighbouring elm, and the silver leap of the fountain on the lawn—tear follows tear; although she knows it not, and glides down the new-made furrows in her cheeks.

The luncheon gong was beaten an hour ago, and then was taken out into the garden for her especial behoof, and beaten again ; but my lady heard it not. She has neither eyes nor ears for the Present at all. She is thinking of some Future more dark and terrible than death itself, a day of dishonour and disgrace, that is creeping slowly but surely upon her and hers. The young leaves babble of it already, and the fountain with its talking water, and every whispering breath of April wind ; and now she listens to them ; and now she tries in vain to think and think ; and now she listens to them perforce again. They are comforters these mysterious voices, and do but pretend to prattle of her woes, in order that they may woo her to oblivion ; for presently the tired arms can no more bear the burden of that piteous face, but sink down on the desk, and on those soft and rounded cushions droops the careworn head ; and the eyelids that have scarce shut throughout the livelong night, nor through many a night before, are closed in slumber. The ee-music, the falling water, and the lullaby of the April leaves, through Nature's kindly hands, have given my lady a nepenthe draught ; and, thanks to it, she has forgotten her woes ; nay, more, it has substituted for them joys borrowed from the unreturning past, which, while we tarry in dreamland, are as real as any.

My lady is once more a fisherman's daughter, upon the banks of Blea. The river that flows beside her father's door is almost as salt as the sea itself, and twice a day the sea itself comes up and fills the creeks, and sets

afloat the boats and colliers that lie sideways on the oozy beach. When it retires, she longs to be taken with it, for ere that tide can reach the open sea, it must needs pass by the port of Bleamouth, where her lover Ralph dwells. Young as she is, she has been wooed by others, and they better matches than this roving sailor, who, although he has saved a little money, does not know, says her father, how to keep it; and when that is gone, how will he keep himself save by going to sea again; much more, then, how will he keep his wife Lucy and a household? But these wise sayings are naught in Lucy's ears, in which love whispers always its smooth prophecies, and Ralph's rich laugh dispels the old man's forebodings, or plays upon them as though they were the very strings of mirth.

As handsome and stout-hearted a lad he is as ever was fitted to make his own way through the world; able enough to thrust to left and right all jostling compeers, and by no means one to lack or to let those dear to him lack, while bread is to be got by sweat of brow. A smile comes over my lady's face, and makes it young again, the while she dreams; for now she sees his signals in the coming boat, and now himself, and now he leaps ashore, and clasps her with his stalwart arm, and now her fingers play with the dark locks that curl above his tanned and manly brow. 'Tis more than half a lifetime back—but she knows not that—and the colour comes again to the wan cheek as though it were a maiden's, and once more love awakens in her widowed heart. He speaks; but ere his tongue can shape the words, a sense of doubt begins to perplex and pain her. She is a girl, and yet a woman in the vale of years; a fisher's daughter though a lady bred, with all the circumstances of rank and wealth about her; the voice is her lover's voice, and yet sounds strangely like another's; she is on the borderland 'twixt waking and sleeping, where, as in a dissolving view, the coming and the passing pictures interlace and exchange features, and the dream and the reality struggle together

for life. Some one is speaking, however, that is certain, and the voice, as no woman can doubt, is tremulous and love-laden.

"And yet, Rose—for I may call you Rose, may I not?—beautiful as these pictures are, I do not think they are more exquisite than those which you have painted yourself."

"You flatter me, Sir Richard," returned a second voice, with which my lady was no better acquainted than with the first; for although she could not but be aware of who the speakers were, since they addressed one another by their names, she did not recognise her own son's speech, so changed it was from its ordinary polite but icy tones; while Rose Aynton's, upon the other hand, generally so quiet and submissive, were tinged with a mocking bitterness. If Sir Richard Lisgard was really about to lay his fortune at the feet of this penniless girl, it seemed strange indeed that she should reply to him in so unnatural a key. That the delirious joy that might well be at her heart should not be altogether repressible, was to be expected, and that her tongue should falter in endeavouring to conceal her triumph; but there was that in the young girl's accents different from anything that could be thus explained. Instead of trembling and hesitation in her speech, there was sheer scorn. Perhaps my lady should have come forth at once from where she sat an involuntary eaves-dropper; but it must be allowed that the temptation to remain was very great. Moreover, there were reasons why she could not explain her own presence in that particular portion of the library; and again, should she disclose herself, the young people would feel no less uncomfortable than though they should even discover at last that their interview had not been so solitary as they imagined, for how did she know what had occurred while she was sleeping, and how should she persuade Miss Rose, even if her word was sufficient for Richard, that she *had* been sleeping during that critical period? True, if it was certain that the offer about to be made would be accepted, as

indeed there was every likelihood that it would be, it was highly expedient—for various reasons known to my lady—that she should step forward, and prevent matters from going further; but so strange did the girl's voice strike upon her experienced ear, that Lady Lisgard waited in hopes of she scarce knew what—some almost miracle that might make her personal interposition unnecessary. At the same time her curiosity became so excessive during the protracted pause that followed Rose's “You flatter me,” that she ventured to peer round the corner of the recess wherein she sat, which was now far more in shade than when she had entered it at noon.

They were standing not very far from her—those two unconscious young people—in front of a huge portfolio, which leant against a statue of Cupid and Psyche. The old, old tale of love which the sculpture typified was evidently being anew repeated by one at least of the living pair. Sir Richard, who had been turning over the pictures, kept his hand mechanically on one of them, but his eyes were fixed with a winning softness, which even his mother had never seen in them before, upon his fair companion. Through one of the small western windows, the last gleam of the dying sun had found its way, and rested upon his crisp brown curls; his manly face glowed in a golden haze, while in his eyes there beamed a light that no sun can give, and mellower than the rays of moon or star.

“I do not flatter you, sweet Rose,” he said; “I love you.” She too had one hand upon the picture, and but for it, it seemed for a moment as though she would have fallen, so deadly pale she grew the while he spoke. Her eyelids quivered, and then slowly sank like two white rose-leaves on her cheek; while her unoccupied hand fell from her pale lips, and hung down by her side quite motionless.

“She cannot give him nay,” thought Lady Lisgard; “the girl is overcome with her great joy.”

"Why do you not speak, dear Rose?" continued Sir Richard; "or may I take your silence for consent, and thus set loving seal——"

He moved towards her, and round her dainty waist had placed his arm, when she sprang from him like a frightened fawn, who, although so seeming tame that it will hover nigh, and even follow one, darts off in terror when we strive to caress it.

"No, Sir Richard no," cried she; "I cannot marry you—I dare not; and I will not. You are much too proud and arrogant for me."

"But not *to* you, Rose," pleaded the young man earnestly. "You shall be my mistress, I your servant always. If I have ever been proud to you, I pray you to forgive it. I do beseech your pardon. It seemed at first that I was right to be so. You do not understand how one like me, so——"

"So well born and so rich," interrupted the young girl quietly, looking up into his face with steady gaze. "Yes, I understand that well, Sir Richard; and I, on the other hand, a dependent girl, so inferior to the sort of bride that you had a right to look for; it was well to keep me at a respectful distance."

"No, not so, Rose," cried the other hastily; "I swear that you are inferior to no woman whom I have ever seen. But I did not wish—— I thought at first, that it would not be for your happiness——"

"And your first thought was right, Sir Richard," broke in the other bitterly. "When you said to yourself, I will not encourage this young girl to think it possible that she should ever be the mistress of Mirk Abbey, you were wise. You did right to hold yourself aloof, to behave with studied stiffness and formality, to let me know though I might worship your exalted station, and admire your handsome face——"

"Rose! Rose!"

"Ay, it is Rose now, but it was Miss Aynton then," continued she, beating her foot upon the floor. "You

determined, I say, within yourself that I should never so forget our relative positions as to misconstrue any attentions you might please to pay me ; you held yourself so high, and stooped so condescendingly when you did stoop, that, upon my part at least, you resolved to nip the young beginnings of love, if such there should be, in their very bud. And, Sir Richard Lisgard, you succeeded."

She rose to her full height and pointed at him with her white hand contemptuously ; her swan-like bosom moved, with rapid ebb and flow, in angry scorn ; her curling lips gave wormwood to her words. And yet, although he felt her biting speech, the young man thought he had never seen her half so beautiful, half so worthy to be his wife.

"It is you who are proud now, Rose," returned he, speaking with effort. "I did not think that I could ever have heard such words from a woman's lips, and yet have sought to woo her. It is your turn to play the tyrant ; but though, by Heaven, you look every inch a queen——"

"I thank you, Sir," interrupted the girl coldly ; "but you need say no more. There is no necessity to offer me that one more chance which your generosity suggests to you. However incomprehensible and audacious, coming from these humble lips, may such an answer sound, Sir Richard Lisgard is refused."

"Rose, dear Rose," cried the young man passionately ; "if this be punishment, do not push it, I pray you, further than I can bear. There is something in your face in such ill accordance with your speech, that I cannot yet despair. Is it not possible, sweet girl, that at some future time—not now, but when you have seen how humble and devoted I can be, that you may teach your heart to love me ?"

"No." A full and rounded word, without a flaw of doubt to mar its clearness ; a sentence irreversible ; a judgment against which he felt there could be no appeal.

"But look you, Rose," continued the baronet huskily ;

“it is said that the true love grows after marriage. Suppose I am content to wed you on that chance, as in very truth I am. Look you, the scene is fair you behold through yonder window, and all that you see is mine. The Abbey, too, is mine, or will be so at my mother’s death.” [A shadow of pain flits across my lady’s face, to hear her son speak thus so lightly of that loss, to please a girl whom he has not known six months, and who does not even love him.] “I have broad acres, girl, fields, farms—a goodly rent-roll. My wife—the Lady Lisgard—will have more than enough of wealth to maintain her high position. Rose! have you no ambition?”

Miss Aynton here again grew strangely agitated; once more her cheeks grew pale, and her limbs trembled beneath her.

“Wretched girl! can she indeed be going to sell herself?” thought my lady.

“There is nothing,” pursued the wooer, perceiving his advantage, “which will be out of your reach. You will mix with those same persons to whose society you have been already accustomed, but in a very different relation towards them; you will be their equal in station, and they will be compelled to acknowledge that superiority in all other respects which they have refused to see in you while a mere dependant on your aunt’s caprice. You will be enabled, I do not say to repay scorn for scorn—for your sweet nature is incapable of such revenge—but to extend to those who have wounded you forgiveness; to return each kindness fiftyfold.”

“Sir Richard Lisgard,” replied the young girl, speaking slowly, but with great distinctness, “my answer has been given you already. It is true that your last arguments moved me, but not for the reason you imagine. I can marry you neither for love nor for money. You pique yourself, I think, on being a gentleman; being so, you will cease to press me further. I am conscious of the honour you have done me in this matter, and I thank you; but I decline your offer.”

The young man bowed, but without speaking. His features, which had softened to an extraordinary degree throughout their interview, began to assume a look even haughtier than before ; his pride was all the greater since he had forced himself to stoop in vain.

"I have only one thing, then, to request, Miss Aynton," said he after a long silence. "I trust that you will not permit what has just occurred to curtail your stay at Mirk. It is understood that you are to remain here until after the celebration of—of my majority." He could scarcely get the word out, poor fellow : he had looked forward so to her loving sympathy upon that proud occasion, which now seemed emptied of all its happy auguries.

"Do not fear, Sir Richard," returned the girl with pity ; "no one shall know that the heir of Mirk has met with this disappointment. I will remain here, since you wish it. Your behaviour towards me needs no alteration to conceal the fact that you have ever been my lover."

He had once more so reinstated himself in his proof-armour of pride, that the young baronet was not even aware that this last shaft had any barb.

"I thank you, Miss Aynton," said he frigidly ; "if at any time it should be within my power to do you or yours a service, please to command me to the uttermost."

He bowed, and strode away ; she heard him close the door, neither softly nor in anger, and then his measured step upon the carpetless oaken stair without.

"I have not broken his heart, that's certain," muttered Rose Aynton, with a crooked smile ; "the lover was lost in the patron soon indeed."



CHAPTER X.

MISS ROSE AYNTON "COMES OUT."

ROR some minutes there was a total silence in the vast apartment, very oppressive to at least one of the two persons present. "How long did this proud girl intend to remain and keep her a prisoner?" thought my lady. She was rejoiced that Miss Aynton had refused her son, but at the same time angry with her for having done so. Rose must surely have had some motive for it far deeper than the mere revenging herself upon him for fancied slights. And yet Letty, who was in the girl's confidence, seemed certain that she had no accepted lover—no previous engagement, such as alone seemed a sufficient reason for rejecting so advantageous a proposal. Perhaps she was even now repenting with tears the determination which had earned for her so dearly-bought a triumph. My lady ventured to look forth once more. Yes, the poor girl was doubtless crying bitterly. Her face was hidden in her hands, but there was a convulsive movement of the round white shoulders that told its tale of inward grief. "Poor thing, poor thing!" My lady's kind heart yearned towards her now that she was sorry for her treatment of her son. Perhaps—not knowing Sir Richard as his mother knew him—she might even now make some hopeless endeavour to win him back to her. If she succeeded, that would be the worst thing that could possibly happen;

and if she failed—as was almost certain—then she would have to suffer all this pain over again. Was it not my lady's duty, then, to do her best to spare this unhappy motherless girl such bitter disappointment and humiliation, and to comfort her all she could under her present trouble? At all events, after some such manner Lady Lisgard reasoned. She did not stop to think of herself at all—of the imputation of eaves-dropping to which she must necessarily expose herself—but stepped forth at once from the recess, and walked quietly to where Rose was standing. Her footsteps made no noise upon the thick matting that was laid down the centre of the polished floor. As she approached the unconscious girl, she was compelled to acknowledge to herself, for the first time, how strikingly attractive a young woman Miss Aynton was. She had certainly not the beauty of my lady's own daughter Letty, nor was she so tall, or perhaps so graceful; but her figure, although it was one likely to get coarse in time, was really perfect; her head, exquisitely set on well-shaped shoulders, was small, but bore such a profusion of black-brown hair as would have furnished half-a-dozen ordinary young ladies with *chignons*; her hands and arms were plump and white. Her eyes—Lady Lisgard thought that she had never seen such wondrous eyes as those which flashed upon her now in sudden recognition, then terror, then rage—not a trace of tears in them, and all the white face cold and still, not puckered up with woe, as she had expected to see it.

"So you have been a spectator, Lady Lisgard, of the late love scene, have you?" said Rose Aynton in a low and suppressed tone. "That was very generous and like a gentlewoman—in one's hostess, too."

"Hush, Rose; do not say things that you may afterwards be sorry for. I will tell you how it happened."

"Nay, do not trouble yourself, my lady; I can guess. You knew Sir Richard had made an appointment with me here, and you wished to hear with what rapturous gratitude the penniless girl would consent to be his bride.

I hope you *did* hear, Madam, since you took such trouble."

"Yes, Rose, I did hear. Your cruel words shall not rob you of my sympathy. I am sorry for my son, of course ; but I am sorry for you also. I had been worried, vexed by many things of which it is not necessary to tell you ; I came hither for solitude, and wearied out by many a sleepless night—nights of care, girl, such as I trust you may never know—I fell asleep in yonder recess. I never heard you enter the room at all. I woke up while you were speaking, but scarcely knew whether I ought to reveal myself or not. I heard you reject poor Richard ; then, when he had gone, I thought that you repented having done so. I was moved at seeing you look so white and still. I felt for you, Rose, with all my heart, and came out, when I might as easily have remained concealed, to try to comfort you. My poor dear girl !"

"That was very kind," returned Rose quietly. "But if I had behaved otherwise, would you then have welcomed me as your daughter-in-law? Please to tell me that."

"If I should say 'Yes,' you would not believe me, Rose. So why ask me such a question? Moreover, the matter is settled now for ever. He would be a doting lover, indeed, who would forgive such a repulse ; and Richard is the last man in all the world to do so."

"Do you think so?" answered the young girl with an incredulous smile. "You have forgotten surely your own youth, Lady Lisgard."

"What know you of my youth, girl?" asked my lady hastily, her pale face flushing with emotion.

"Nay, do not be angry," returned the other coldly. "I meant nothing, except that when a woman is young she is very powerful. You say that I have lost Sir Richard, and therefore you pity me. Now, I will wager by this time to-morrow that I could win him back again."

Was this the humble and submissive girl who came to Mirk four months ago, almost from school, and whom she

had treated as a mother treats her child? The conscious belle of a London season could not have spoken with a greater confidence; the most practised husband-hunter with a cooler calculation. "Come," continued Rose, "if you really are so sorry for me, Lady Lisgard, and so distressed upon your son's account, have I your permission to do my best to repair this common misfortune?"

My lady could scarce conceal a shudder at the thought how nearly had this cold-blooded scheming girl become her daughter-in-law. Whatever objections she might have had to such a match before—and they were in themselves insuperable—seemed to have grown to twice their former proportions. The girl's determination and self-confidence alarmed her, too, for that result about which she had before felt so certain. At all hazards, she was resolved to prevent an attempt at reconciliation being made.

"No, Rose; I do not wish you to try to recover the affections of Sir Richard."

"So, so; then we have the truth at last, Lady Lisgard. You are not willing that I should be daughter-in-law of yours. You grudge me such great good-fortune as to be allied with the race of Lisgards: and yet it fell to your own lot—as I have heard—even in a more unexpected manner."

"Miss Aynton, what I was is no affair of yours," replied my lady with quivering lips. "You have only to remember what I *am*."

"I do so, Madam, very well. I see you held in honour by all people, and without doubt, justly. Your position is indeed to me an object of admiration, perhaps, I may add, even of envy. Is it not natural that it should be so? And when your son offers to lift me from my present low estate to place me as high, why should I hesitate to take advantage of such a proposal? I have refused him, it is true; but now, being, as you say, repentant, why should I not strive to recover what I have let slip—wealth, honours, title—"

"Rose Aynton," returned my lady, clasping the girl's white wrist, and speaking in very earnest but broken tones, "I warn you, do not do it. Even if you succeed, you may not win all you dream of. Strive not, I charge you, for your own sake, to undo what has been done. I have reasons for what I say beyond any that you can guess. If you would be happy, do not endeavour to ally yourself with this family."

"Lady Lisgard, what *can* you mean?" ejaculated the girl, her white face flushed at last, her wide flashing eyes no longer hard and cynical, and her every feature impatient for reply.

"I mean simply what I say. Seek not to be Richard's wife. If you want money—and I know from your own lips it is not love which prompts you—you shall have such wealth as is mine to give. I had meant it for a different purpose; but that is no matter. Only do not seek to win back my son; and when you leave us, I will bless you for your forbearance—and for your silence, Rose."

"Yes, Lady Lisgard, I will say nothing of all this," returned the girl thoughtfully, after a short pause. "I promise you, too, that I will never speak of love to Sir Richard further; and as for your offer of a bribe, though I do not know that I have ever shown myself so greedy as to deserve it—I will forgive you even that."

"Thank you, thank you, Rose," answered my lady eagerly. "I dare say, in my haste and trouble, I may have said things to offend you, and if so, I am very sorry. You have doubtless your troubles too."

"Yes, I have," answered the girl gravely; "and I should like to be alone with them for a little, Lady Lisgard, unless you have anything else to ask of me."

"Nothing, Rose—nothing; you have granted all I wished. You will be as undisturbed here as in your own apartment; nay, even more so; for Letty will not think of coming here to seek you out. Nobody ever comes into the library."

My lady leaned forward as she spoke, and kissed the girl's smooth brow, cold as a tablet of alabaster, then softly left the room.

Rose Aynton stood for a full minute, listening, eager and motionless as Echo herself, before she stepped to the door, and turned the key.

"No more spying, my lady!" ejaculated she; "my hostess has her secrets, it seems, as well as I. It would be well if I could discover hers before she found out mine. What could she mean by cautioning me, for my own sake, not to ally myself with the Lisgards? She is not a fool to think to frighten me with a mere gipsy's warning—threatening much, but meaning nothing. What reasons can those be against my becoming her daughter-in-law, which are 'beyond any that I can guess?' If I could only get this proud dame beneath my thumb, then, indeed, I might recompense myself somewhat for having missed Sir Richard. To think that I should have lost a prize like that through mere humility of mind! 'Yet even if you succeed,' said she, 'you may not win all you dream of.' Those were her very words. 'Haste and trouble' alone could never have suggested them to her, although they may have made her indiscreet enough to utter them. What has put my lady in such low spirits of late, and kept her so moped up within the Abbey walls? How came she alone here in this place, whither, as she says, 'No one ever comes?' She must have been hidden in yonder recess in the far corner, or we must needs have seen her, when my love-sick swain and I were walking up and down."

Swift and noiseless, like some beautiful wild beast upon the trail, Rose Aynton crossed the room, and scanned, with a cruel look in her dark eyes, the little study over which was printed *Legal*.

"I never heard that my lady was given to law," muttered she derisively. "True, she said that she had been sent to sleep, a thing which anyone of these folios one might think would compass. But why did

she come hither to read at all? There must have been something of interest to attract her. The books on this side do not seem to have been touched for ages; but here—yes, some one has been to these quite lately, for the dust has been disturbed, and here, if I mistake not, is the dainty print of my lady's fingers. We are getting warm, as the children say at hide-and-seek. What have we here? A slip of paper for a marker, torn cross-wise from an envelope with *Lad* upon it. It was surely imprudent of my lady to use her own address for such a purpose. *Wills!* Ah, she has been studying the art of making wills, I dare say. Considering Sir Richard is already so well off—and since I am not to be his wife—it is to be hoped she will leave her money to son Walter; and some, too, to poor dear Letty, for she is one who will never learn to help herself in this world. It is well for her that she has not to live by her wits. If she had been in my position, she would have been a governess. Yes, it's all about Wills, this book. And why should not my lady make a will, being of ripe age, and yet not old enough to sniff that smell of the charnel-house, which renders the operation so unpleasant a duty to the aged? I am afraid—unless, indeed, I could find the will itself—that I have but discovered a mare's nest after all. However, here are more book-markers; come, let us combine our information. *Succession!* That's only the same story. *Illegitimacy!* Great Heaven, but this is more than I had bargained for!"

The girl stepped swiftly to the open window, and pushed the heavy folds of hair behind her ears. "I feel my blood all rushing to my brain, and roaring 'Ruin!'" murmured she. "If this sudden fear has any real foundation, then indeed am I hoist with my own petard. No wonder she warned me against alliance with her race, if what I here suspect is true. They will need well-born suitors themselves, she meant, to make up for what is lacking in their blood, and mayhap money too. The

will of old Sir Robert may be disputed. The Succession—but no, I had forgotten—there is no one to succeed save her two sons, for they have not a relative beyond themselves in the world, these Lisgards; but the title—that would be lost, of course. That's what she hinted when she said I might not gain the thing I counted on, even though I won Sir Richard. He cannot know of it; he could not be so proud if he had the least suspicion of any blot in his own escutcheon. How he would wither if one said to him: ‘Thou Bastard!’ And yet I gravely doubt whether this discreet Madam, his mother, has not one day tripped. ‘What know you of my youth, girl?’ cried she a while ago, white, as I thought, with anger; but it was fear, it seems. She comes here alone to find out for herself by study what secret course to follow, or what hidden dangers to avoid, having no counsellor in whom she can confide. That seems so far certain, or she would surely ask her son himself, being a lawyer, or that wise Mr. Arthur Haldane, whom I so honestly dislike, for their advice. It may be all this bodes as ill for Walter as for his brother; it may be that it bodes the younger the best of fortune, and the elder the worst. That would be a brave day, indeed, for some one, on which the proud young baronet should sink to plain Mr. Richard, and the poor captain rise to be Sir Walter Lisgard! And, again, there may be nothing in all this, after all. Time will doubtless show, and it shall be my task to hurry Time's footsteps towards the discovery.”





CHAPTER XI.

UP EARLY.

HT has been justly observed that one half of the world does not know how the other half lives. The statement is a very safe one, and might have been made a great deal more comprehensive by the philosopher who uttered it without risking his reputation for sagacity. We do not know how our next-door neighbour lives, except in the sense of what he has for dinner, which may indeed be discovered by the curious ; nay, we often know not how our own household lives, how our very sons conduct themselves when not at meal-times and under our very eyes, what pursuits they really follow, what hopes, what fears, what ambitions they in secret entertain. It is well, indeed, and should be a matter of congratulation, if we are quite cognizant of the “goings on” of our wives and daughters. It is strange to think what a world in little lies under the roof of any great mansion, such as Mirk Abbey. How interesting would the genuine individual biographies—if one could only get at them—of such a household be, from that of the mistress of the establishment (whose troubles we are endeavouring to portray) down to that of the under kitchen-maid, concerning whom we have “no information,” but who has doubtless, her own temptations, wrongs and troubles also, which concern her with equal nearness, although they may not be so

genteel ! It is probable that the true history of the second gravedigger in *Hamlet* would be to the full as interesting as what we know of that philosophic prince himself, though *his* father had not been murdered by his uncle, albeit even that may have been the case, for aught we know. But, alas ! the novelist has not the power which the *Devil on Two Sticks* possessed of lifting the tiles off the attics ; but has generally to content himself with such glimpses as he can obtain through the key-holes of the first and second floors.

Taking advantage of even this moderate privilege, we are sometimes rewarded with phenomena. Thus, it is little less than a portent to see Captain Walter Lisgard, who is not generally addicted to early rising, up and dressed upon a certain May morning before the clock on the great stairs has sounded three. True, he has been out of bed once or twice at such an hour on other occasions, but then it was because he had not retired to rest the night before. He has done that, however, this time, or, at all events, has exchanged his evening-dress for morning-costume. Some people do get up at the most premature hours, even in winter, and light their own fires, and retrim the midnight lamp to pursue literary or scientific labours ; but if Captain Lisgard has got up to study, we will eat him. What *can* he be about ? He gropes his way down the great staircase, where darkness is made visible by streaks of grayish light—which is not yet dawn—struggling through cracks and crannies ; and he stumbles over the heavy rug beneath the bottom step, and swears with involuntary emphasis. Then he listens a while, to see what will come of that. The great clock on the hall-table ticks reprovingly : “Don’t, don’t—shame, shame !” as he never heard it tick before ; and here and there breaks forth an expostulatory creaking, as though from moral furniture, which has no such scruples in the daytime ; but his ejaculation has aroused no living being.

Softly he turns the key of the front-door, softly with-

draws the bolts, and would as softly have slipped out, but that there is suddenly a jar and a whir, and the opening door is held fast by an iron hand. "Confound the chain!" exclaims the captain. "It is as difficult to get out of this house as out of Newgate." Then, when all is still quiet, he emerges upon the stone steps with an "I wonder, for my part, how burglars are ever discovered," and takes his way towards the village. The gates are locked at the end of the avenue, and the porter and his wife are doubtless fast asleep, as well as fair-haired Polly—dreaming perhaps of himself, thinks the captain with a half-contemptuous, half-complacent smile—but Master Walter, who is as active as a cat, climbs the stone pillar by help of the iron hinge, and "drops" noiselessly on to the road. He passes up the humble street, where each cottage is quiet as the grave—two blessed hours intervening yet between its inmates and their toil, and makes for the *Lisgard Arms*. The inn stands on a slight elevation, so that he sees it some time before he nears it. "Why, the place is on fire!" mutters the captain; and certainly there is some extraordinary illumination taking place in one of the apartments. A flood of light pours from it as from some Pharos, as though to beckon benighted folks whither good ale is to be found; and yet the house is always shut at eleven, in conformity with the squire's orders.

"It's that infernal idiot Derrick himself who has done it," continues the captain. "That's his room, I know. Just as if he could not have got up in the dark, as I did: a fellow that probably never had more than a farthing-dip to light him any morning, before he went to Cariboo. I wonder, for my part, he can dress without a valet. What a stuck-up, vulgar dog it is! How I hate his pinchbeck ostentation, and still worse, his dreadful familiarity! If it could only be found out immediately after this Derby that he was a returned transport, with five-and-twenty years or so of his sentence still unexpired, how delightful it would be! I really think that he is least

objectionable in the evenings, when he is drunk. There is something original in his brute-manner of swilling ; a sort of over-driven-ox style about his stagger, which would make his fortune upon any stage—where there was room enough for the magnitude of the exhibition. Certainly, one has to pay for the society of this sort of gentry, and still more for their friendship. Alas, that I should have made this fortunate savage fond of me ! I wish I could feel as Valentine did with Orson, instead of being much more like the too ingenious Frankenstein, whose monster became his master. However, that has not come about yet—notwithstanding meddling Mr. Arthur Haldane's warnings.—Let me see, it was arranged, I think, that I was to whistle to this animal.” Master Walter drew a silver cab-call from his pocket, and executed upon it the disconsolate cry of one who in London streets between the closing of the night-houses and the rising of the sun desires a Hansom. Instantly the light from the inn began to diminish—once, twice, thrice ; and then the casement became blind and rayless like the other windows. “That beggar had four candles lit!” ejaculated the captain with irritation. “It was a mercy that he did not bring out the village fire-engine. Here he comes with his eternal pipe, too. I dare say he had the impudence to light *that* before he left the house, and Steve’s red nose will smell it.”

There are some men who always look the same no matter at what hour you come upon them : fresh, and hearty, and strong, they have but to duck their heads in cold water, and straightway the fatigues of a weary day or a sleepless night are utterly obliterated. They rejoice like giants to run their courses without any sort of preparation in the way of food and sleep, such as the rest of mankind require. Against this healthy animalism we protest, by calling it rude health ; and to those who are of a less powerful constitution, it is naturally an offensive spectacle. Walter Lisgard had himself by no means a delicate organisation ; his complexion, though

pale, was far from sickly ; his limbs, though models of grace rather than of strength, were of good proportions and well knit. But he was conscious of looking heavy-eyed and haggard, and he secretly resented the robust and florid appearance of the unconscious individual who now joined him—a man at least twenty-five years his senior.

"I suppose you have been accustomed to get up at these unearthly hours at the gold-diggings, that you look so disagreeably wide-awake, Mr. Derrick," grumbled he. "You would very much oblige me if you would but yawn."

"Get up ! Master Walter ; why, I've never been to bed," answered the bearded man with a great guffaw. "The fact is, that I took a little more than was good for me last night, and I did not dare lie down, knowing that we had this business on hand so early."

"Why, one would think, by the amount of light, that you had been lying in state, like some deceased king of the Cannibal Islands," returned the other peevishly. "Was it your habit to use two pair of candles in your bed-room in Cariboo ?"

"Well, I never had a bed-room there, that you would call such, as I have told you again and again, Master Walter ; but I have burned twenty candles at a time when they were selling at Antler Creek at five dollars a pound. You imagine, I suppose, that it is only you gentlemen who live at home at ease who have money to spend ; but let me tell you that is not the case. I will go bail for my part, for example, that I have paid more sovereigns away in twenty-four hours than your brother, Sir Richard, ever did in a week."

"My dear Mr. Derrick, you are boastful this morning," said the captain quietly : "it is my belief that you have taken a hair of the dog that bit you overnight."

"Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't, Master Walter ; but I shall burn just as many candles as I like. I have worked hard enough for my money, and, dam'me, but

I'll enjoy it. Why, when I was at New Westminster, I had my horse shod with gold, Sir ; and if I choose, I'll do it here."

" You would have a perfect right so to do, Mr. Derrick," returned the other gravely ; " and for my part, if your horse should cast a shoe in my neighbourhood, I should warmly applaud your expensive tastes. But you must have been really very rich, to do such things. Now, how much do you think you were worth when you were at New Westminster ? "

" That's tellings, captain," responded the other with a cunning chuckle ; " but when I was on Fraser River, me and my mate Blanquette, we made——"

" Well, now, what *did* you make ? " urged the young man, as the other hesitated.

" Well, we made nothing for the first five days," answered Derrick drily—" nothing at all.—How far have we got to go to reach the Measured Mile by this road ? "

The two men had left the village, and were pursuing a winding chalk-road that led, but not directly, to the Downlands at the back of Mr. Chifney's stables.

" It is a very circuitous route," returned Master Walter frankly ; " and I was in hopes it might be shortened to the fancy by hearing you tell something of your own story. But, of course, I have no wish to press you to tell it against your will. You have conferred obligations upon me enough already, I am quite aware."

This was the first sentence of conciliation, not to say of civility, that the young man had spoken, and heretofore his air had been cross or cynical ; yet no sooner did he evince this little of good-will, than the manner of the other softened at once to a degree that was very remarkable in so rough a man.

" Don't talk of obligations, lad, for I like you—ay, so well, that I wish you were son of mine ; not that I am fit to be the father of such as you either ; I *know* that well."

" If I were your son, I am afraid you would have a

good deal of trouble with me, Mr. Derrick," replied the young man laughing: "I am not a good boy."

"That is true, Walter Lisgard; and yet I never saw a face that took my liking as yours does—save once. I could not tell what drew me so towards you, when I first met you up at the Farm yonder; but now I know very well."

"Then it is to the similarity between myself and some other favoured individual that I am indebted for your regard? That rather robs the compliment of its flavour."

"Ay, my lad; but you are dear to me for your own sake also, although, indeed, I scarce know why."

"Thank you, Mr. Derrick."

"True," continued the other thoughtfully, without noticing his companion's flippant tone, "you are like—ah, Heaven, how like you are to one that's dead and gone! Indeed, I can refuse you nothing while I think upon it. It is not everybody, however, lad, whom I would humour by telling exactly what I am worth. While a man is merely known as rich, he may have any sum, and be looked up to accordingly; but when his wealth can be reckoned to a pound, he loses credit. If *Many-laws* wins at Epsom, I shall be worth—ay, near a hundred thousand pounds."

"I suppose no one in Cariboo ever made a sum like that by gold-digging, eh?"

"I think no one, Master Walter. There was no claim so rich as my mate's and mine at Snowy Creek, and it did not yield that sum. But, by Heaven, how well I remember what it did yield. It seemed to me then that I should never run risks any more, but live on what I had in content and plenty; and yet here I am, this very morning——"

"My dear Sir," interrupted his companion gaily, "it appears to me that you are taking gloomy views. What is life without excitement?"

"Ay, that is very well for *you*, lad, who have something to fall back upon, if your little schemes should miscarry.

Excitement in your case is only another name for amusement ; but in mine——”

“ Well, in yours, Mr. Derrick ? ”

“ Do not call me Mister ; call me Ralph, lad—that is, if you are not ashamed of me altogether.— You *are* ashamed, I see. Well, never mind.—Let me see, I was speaking of Cariboo, was I not ? Well, success or failure there was a question of life and death. One might be a beggar, or one might be the king of the colony. I had known what poverty was—and that is not merely being without money, mind ; I have lived among a savage people for months who had neither gold nor silver—nothing to hoard and nothing to spend save shells picked up on the sea-shore, and strung on sea-weed for a purse ; and I was as poor as they ; but yet it was not poverty. But I had felt the sting of that in many a crowded city, and I came to Cariboo to escape from it. If I should make my thousand pounds or so, I would buy a farm, or a share in a ship, and live a quiet respectable life to the end of my days. While making these good resolutions, my ready money—which was also all I had in the world—was melting fast. With the last ten pounds of it, I bought the half of a small claim at Snowy Creek. Blanquette and I sawed our own lumber and made our own sluices. It was no light work even for me, who had been used to rough it. There was twelve feet of top-stripping to be removed before we could hope to reach the pay-dirt. For the first five days, we made nothing. I would have sold my share in the whole concern for a couple of pounds, and begun life with that afresh ; but on the sixth day we found fourteen ounces of gold, and I was worth fifty pounds. Then I would not have sold my chance for scarcely any sum that you could name. I would have shot any man that had jumped into our pit, spade in hand, just as I would have shot a dog. Your brother, Sir Richard, may talk about the rights of property, but he never appreciated them as I did then. On the seventh day, we found forty-five ounces ; on the eighth, sixty.

The find kept on increasing, till it rose to four hundred ounces daily, when we employed eight hands to clear away the tailings. The whole area of the place out of which I scooped my fortune was not eighty feet by twenty. I found for my share twelve thousand pounds in it."

"And you brought that safe to England, did you?"

"No, lad, I did not. I spent five hundred pounds of it in champagne—we drank it out of buckets—for one item."

"And in candles, Ralph," asked Master Walter smiling—"how much in candles?"

"In one thing and another, dear lad, I spent four thousand pounds before we landed in England. Even what was left would have seemed affluence six months before— But there, what's the good of talking? There's the rubbing-down house, is it not? and I shall soon know whether I am going to get a second fortune, or to lose what I have."





CHAPTER XII.

THE TRIAL.

EHE sun had risen, and the long waste of down stretched far and wide on all sides ; a broad and level track as smooth as any lawn, with here and there a long but gentle slope, marked the exercising-ground used by Mr. Chifney's horses. This glistened in the early rays like a path of silver. But fringing it on one side lay a great patch of gorse, and this quite twinkled with green and gold from the gossamers, whose slender fibres covered it as with a veil. The air was fresh and odorous with a hundred pleasant scents and in the distant vale the morning mists were lifting from field and farm, from tower and town, as at the command of some enchanter. Nothing was heard but the occasional "tink, tink" of a sheep-bell from the still sleeping folds. It was a scene to charm eye and ear ; but Captain Walter Lisgard of the 104th Dragoons, and Mr. Derrick from Cariboo, were persons upon whom the dawn and its concomitants were a good deal thrown away.

"You are sure this is the right place ?" inquired the colonist as they reached a long low-shuttered building, half brick half wood, where the horses were wont to be rubbed down after their gallops.

"Ay, this is it right enough," was the reply. "I dare

say they are all inside there waiting for us. It does not do to be seen at this sort of work. Yes, here they are."

Inside the doorway of the shed in question stood Mr. Tite Chifney, in company with a gentleman of advanced years, in a white greatcoat and a new broad-brimmed hat, somewhat resembling a bishop's.

"How are you, Lisdard?"

"How do you do, my lord?" were the only salutations that passed between the members of the two parties, who had met entirely upon business.

"Come and beat the furze with me, will you, Derrick? the captain has not his gaiters on. It is well to make quite sure that we are all alone before we begin," said the horse-trainer. The two men accordingly stepped into the gorse, and commenced walking through it in parallel lines, as though in pursuit of game. When he came to a patch of gorse a little higher and thicker than the rest, Mr. Chifney struck it violently with his foot as if for rabbits. All of a sudden, there was a violent ejaculation from Derrick; he threw himself down upon some crouching object, and then came a struggle and a choking scream. "Hollo, don't kill the fellow," exclaimed Chifney running up. "See, he's black in the face, man. Master Walter, my lord—help, here, help!"

The two men who had been left in the rubbing-house came quickly forward, but it took the combined strength of all three of them to release the poor wretch from the powerful grasp of the Cariboo miner.

"Damn the rogue; I'll teach him to come spying here," cried he, nodding with his head towards a shattered telescope, upon which he had just stamped his foot. "I'll squeeze his throat for him."

"You seem to have done that already, Sir," said the man in the broad-brim coolly; "a very little more of it, and you would probably have had *your* throat squeezed for you by the hangman. Poor devil, he doesn't seem to have much beside his life belonging to him, so that it would be hard to take that."

A wretched object, clothed in ragged black, and with wisps of straw for shoes, wet with the dew amid which he had been lying, and shivering with pain and fear, here crawled to the last speaker's feet.

"Don't let 'em murder me, my lord. They *will*, if you don't interfere," screamed the wretched "tout," whose mission it was to procure racing intelligence under difficulties of this sort, but who had been fairly cowed by Derrick's rage and violence. "I swear to you that I will never tell a soul that I have seen your lordship——"

"Quiet, fool!" interrupted the other sternly, "unless you want to have your lying tongue cut out.—It's bad enough," whispered he to the trainer, "that he should have seen *me* here, but do you think he has seen the horses?"

"That's quite certain, my lord," returned the trainer coolly; "and this is a mouth as can't be shut about that matter. But he shall see nothing more of this morning's work.—Come here, you Sir."

Taking the trembling wretch by the collar, he led him to the edge of the furze, and, having securely tied his arms and legs, enveloped his head in a horse-cloth which he brought out of the rubbing-house. From the same building there now emerged two horses, not in the clothes in which exercise was generally taken, but ready in all respects for racing, and ridden not by stable-boys as usual, but by regular jockeys.

"There is no question about it but the bay is the best-looking, my lord," said the trainer, in answer to something that had been addressed to him; "but handsome is as handsome does. You would not thank me for praising *The King* on Epsom Downs, after he had been beaten by an outsider such as yonder horse."

"Who rides the creature?" inquired the other sharply, and looking contemptuously towards the clumsy black, who was no other than our old friend *Menelaus*. "Dam'me if he don't look more fit for a hearse than a race-course."

“Jack Withers, my lord—a man that was with him in France, and thoroughly understands what the horse can do ; and, indeed, there is no other that *can* ride him as should be. That’s the worst of these foreign horses—they are so full of tricks. I’ve known that black stand stock-still in his gallops, and shoot his boy off just like a rocket. He can’t abide a strange seat.”

“Of course Withers rides him in the great race,” observed the other thoughtfully.

“Certainly, my lord, just as Tom Uxbridge here will mount *The King*. What’s the good of having a trial-race unless with the same jocks as is to ride them afterwards ? Starting from that white post, up the rise yonder, round the fir clump, and so back again, is the Derby course to a yard. Master Walter and Mr. Derrick, will you be so good as to bear a hand, and help me out with the steps ?”

“Aint the gentleman in the broad-brim going to use them as well as me ?” observed the colonist insolently, and keeping his hands resolutely in his pockets. “I never engaged myself to be his body servant, as I know on.”

There being no answer to this appeal, Captain Lisgard and the trainer once more entered the rubbing-house, and reappeared dragging with them a movable platform upon wheels, and furnished with a flight of steps after the manner of a pulpit. From the top of this, one might see the whole course from end to end, and upon it the four spectators took their station close to the starting-post.

“Now, my lads, are you both ready ?” inquired the trainer of the jockeys, who were getting their fuming horses into line. “This handkerchief will serve for a flag, and when I drop it, let there be no false starts. One, two, three—now OFF !”

As the handkerchief left his fingers, the bay and black leaped forward as with a single impulse ; the next moment each had got into his stride, and was away like the wind.

"It is amazing how they keep together," muttered his lordship in an uneasy tone; "I should not have thought the Frenchman had had such speed in him."

"It is the hill which will decide the matter, my lord," returned the trainer in a low tone; "the ground is rising already. There, and see, the black draws ahead."

"Ay, the black has it!" cried Derrick with a frightful imprecation. "I will lay fifty pounds to ten on *Many-laws*."

"I take you, Sir," said the man in the broad-brim, coolly, as with race-glass in hand he watched every movement of the horses who were now nearing the fir-clump; "there has something happened to that big-boned animal of yours, I fear. What is it, Chifney?"

He was about to pass the glass to the trainer, but Derrick roughly tore it from his grasp, and applied it to his own eyes. "It's one of his infernal jibs," exclaimed he; and yet— Well done, Jack Withers; that's a five-pound note in *your* pocket. Perhaps you'd like to look again, my lord, for their position is a little altered."

"The black is gaining fast," ejaculated Captain Lisgard, his pale face aglow with excitement. "He has recovered all he lost by that false step. What a pace they are coming down the hill! By Heaven, *The King* is beaten! Tom is using the whip."

"Just what I expected," murmured the trainer.

There was a thunder of hoofs, the smack of a whip again and again, a flash of colour—first black, then bay—and the trial-race was over.

"In a second and a half less time than the last Derby," said his lordship drily, after consulting his stopwatch.

"I think I did not bring you here for nothing, my lord," said the trainer confidentially.

"Certainly not, Mr. Chifney," returned the other bitterly; "I find myself a poorer man than I had thought to be three minutes ago by fifty thousand pounds. Moreover, I have made the acquaintance of one of the greatest

ruffians that I have ever met even upon a race-course. It is altogether an excellent morning's work."

"It would have been worse for you, my lord, if you had not come," answered the trainer with some stiffness; "you would not have thanked me if you had seen this for the first time on Epsom Downs."

"Very true—very true, Mr. Chifney. But you must excuse my feeling a little annoyed by the results of this gallop. And as for this gentleman with the beard—when he has done shaking his hands with his jockey——Here are two five-pound notes for you, Sir—the amount of my bet."

"Keep it yourself, my lord," exclaimed Derrick, waving his hat round and round in frantic joy. 'Or stay, if you're too proud. Here, Jack, is a fiver for you; and here, you poor devil in the horse-cloth, here's another for you, to heal your windpipe, which, I believe, I squeezed a little too hard a while ago. If the race had gone agen me, you'd never have got a shilling of compensation, so you may thank *Manylaws*."

The trainer's hand was clapped upon the incautious gold-digger's mouth with considerable emphasis, but it arrived too late. "The cat was out of the bag." The tout had learned the very piece of intelligence to obtain which he had gone through so much.

Bound and bruised, and in evil plight as he was, the fellow could not help indulging in a sly chuckle, while his four enemies (for the jockeys were already in the rubbing-down house attending to their panting steeds) regarded one another with looks of blank dismay.

"You have done it now, Mr. Derrick," observed the trainer lugubriously. "We shall never get thirty to one —no, nor ten to one—against *Menelaus* again. Great Heaven! why, you wouldn't kill the man!"

The gold digger had drawn a clasp knife, half dagger, half cutting-tool, from his pocket, and was quietly feeling the point of it with his thumb. "I have done wrong," said he, "but it is a wrong which is not without remedy.

No, I am not going to murder this gentleman—at least not now; but I have something of importance to tell him. Look you here, Mr. Tout. I am not a respectable person any more than yourself, in a general way; but there is probably this difference between us—I am a man of my word. What I *say* I will do, I always *do* do, at all hazards. If a man robs another of his gold in the place where I come from, we shoot him; it mayn't be right, but that is the principle on which we act. You will rob me of all I have in the world if you tell what you have seen to-day; consequently, mark me, if you do tell, *I will kill you*. Of this you may be well assured. That is the only satisfaction which will be left me. You have felt my fingers, but you will in that case feel this knife. I hope I make myself well understood— No, Master Walter, this is not your business, but a private matter between this person and myself. I want to take a good look at him, so that I may know him again anywhere; alone or in company, in England or across seas; let him be sure I shall find him out; and I want him to take a good look at me. Mine is not the face of a man who falters in his purpose, or who, having suffered a wrong, puts up with it, I think, and does not revenge himself."

He knelt down, and set his bearded cheek quite close to the luckless tout. Each looked into the other's eyes—one inquiringly, with a half-timid, half-cunning glance; the other sternly, vengefully, like a judge and executioner in one.

"I will never tell!" quavered the miserable wretch—"s'help me Heaven, I never will!"

"Yes, you will," returned Derrick coolly; "I can see that you are a babbler born; and I don't ask impossibilities. Moreover, it is but just that you should derive some advantage from my folly. In a week's time, you may tell your employer what you please. In the meanwhile, there is your five pounds. I wish to act as fairly by you as I can; but if the odds rise or fall respecting

these two horses within seven days—as they can only do if the result of this trial gets wind—then I shall know where to find a sheath for this knife.” With these words he cut the rope that bound the man’s arms and legs, pushed the five-pound note into his hands, and bade him be off: whereupon off he shambled.

Neither the trainer nor the man addressed as “my lord” had stirred or spoken a word during this interview, and Captain Lisgard had only once made a movement as though to interrupt it. All three were well enough pleased that the gold-digger had taken the task of imposing silence into his own hands. In all likelihood, he was merely threatening the fellow; and if not, they did not wish to be accessories before the fact to—to any vengeance he might choose to inflict upon the offending tout.

“Well, gentlemen, we have now six clear days wherein to make our arrangements,” said Derrick, “and a good deal may be done in that time. True, but for my stupid conduct, we might have had more time before us; but I have made what amends lies in my power.”

“You believe, then, that yonder rascal will keep his word, do you?” inquired the trainer incredulously.

“I think so, Mr. Chifney. I shall certainly keep mine,” returned the other gravely. “Master Walter, we had better be moving home.”

At these words, the party separated—like men who have each their work to do, and are glad to be quit of their companions, in order that they may set about it—with no more ceremony than a parting nod. The man in the broad-brim rode away upon a shooting-pony which awaited him in the rubbing-down house. The jockeys paced slowly towards their stables, each horse now clothed and visored as though it had been merely out for early exercise; while Mr. Chifney walked briskly homeward by another route.

Derrick and Captain Lisgard returned together by the

way they came, and plodded on for some time in total silence.

"You will put all your money upon the black un now, I fancy, Master Walter?" observed the gold-digger at last, as they drew near the village.

"I have done that already," replied the young man frankly. "I was thinking rather of hedging when the odds fall."

"Nay, do not do that, lad," rejoined the other earnestly; the thing is a certainty. *The King* was the only horse that we had to fear. On the contrary, my advice is, 'Put the Pot on.'

"The Pot *is* on, with all I have to put in it, Mr. Derrick. You forget that I am not an eldest son, and nobody lends money to a younger."

"Ay, true: there's that confounded stuck-up coxcomb, Sir Richard. But look here, my lad. In this pocket-book I carry all I am worth in the world, for in Cariboo there are no banks, and a man at my time of life does not readily change his habits. Here are five hundred pounds entirely at your service. Nay, I told you that I had taken a liking to you, and I would give them to you right away, only I suppose you are too proud to accept them, save as a loan."

"Mr. Derrick—Ralph—you are very, very kind," said the young man hesitatingly; "but this is a large sum."

"At the present prices, it is ten thousand pounds if *Manylaws* wins," replied the gold-digger, rubbing his hands; "and if *Manylaws* does not win—well, I shall not, I hope, be an importunate creditor. I do not say, 'Do not thank me,' lad, for I like you to smile like that. You are very, very welcome. But here we part; you to your home and friends, and I—well, I am used to be alone. I shall not see a friend's face again till I see yours. Good-bye, dear lad, good-bye."

With a hearty hand-shake and more thanks, Master Walter strode gaily away through the still slumbering village, reclimbed the avenue gate, and let himself noise-

lessly in at the front door. As he passed on tiptoe along a gallery, on the one side of which lay his sister's apartment, and on the other that of Miss Rose Aynton's, a door opened, and an anxious voice whispered, "What news, Walter?" "Good news," replied he in the same cautious tone, and glided on to his own room.





CHAPTER XIII.

AT SIR ROBERT'S GRAVE.

ET had been observed, as I have already said, that my lady had not left the Abbey grounds for these many weeks ; but there had been one exception to that course of conduct. She had never omitted to visit, as usual, her late husband's grave, and to lay upon it a posy of spring flowers, gathered by her own hands ; but she did this now in the evening, instead of the daytime, as heretofore. It was not, however, likely that any intruder should be found there at any hour. Whoever of the household saw her walking in the direction of the little church—only a stone's-throw from the servants' offices—took great care to avoid her, or to appear, if they needs must meet her, unconscious of her errand ; and while she was there, no domestic used the little zigzag path among the grass-grown graves that formed the short cut to the village. The country folk were forbidden at all times to approach the Abbey by that way, so the sacred spot was almost as private as though it had been an appendage of the Abbey itself, as it had been in the old times. Mirk lay quite out of the high-road, so that no stranger “stretching his legs,” while the coach changed horses, ever strolled into its God's-acre to spend a profitless five minutes amid its solemn records ; nor, indeed, was there anything in the grave-ground, whatever might have been

in the church to attract such persons, in the way of monument or effigy. Yet the humble graves were all well kept ; not broken or dinted in, as one too often sees them in such places ; nor did the head-stones lean this way and that, as though they strove to wrench up the very mounds they were set to mark ; nor were the long rank grasses and the nettles permitted to over-grow the spot, and hide it from the sun. Upon every slab, however, save one, time was doing its work, covering with moss and lichen the grey surface, and filling up the letters on the stones—just as in the hearts of the survivors it was healing the sense of loss, and effacing the memory of the departed one. The sole exception was the stone which commemorated Sir Robert's death. His marble cross was without speck or flaw. It stood in the western corner, in a little plot of garden-ground of its own, and beside it was a vacant space, left there by his widow's desire, that she might herself be laid there when God's good time should come.

It is the evening of the day upon which Master Walter got up so early, and my lady has come, as usual, to her husband's tomb. Her hand is resting on the top of it, whereon she has just hung a chaplet of fresh-gathered flowers ; but her look is fixed upon the western sky, where the glory of the sunken sun yet lingers. It may be but a simple faith that associates heaven with the sky, but it is a very natural one. My lady's soul was longing to be at rest somewhere beyond those quiet clouds which flecked that golden deep. Death is not so invariably hateful to us as the divines would paint it; it has no terrors for the good—nay, sometimes not for the bad either—while to the wretched it would often be more welcome than the dawn.

“If I could only ‘fall asleep,’ as is said of the saints,” thought my lady, “here, and at this instant, how well for all would it be ! Some only live for others, they say, but the best that could possibly happen to all I love would be that I should be laid in my grave. And

some have died for others, as God knows I would die for any one of my dear ones, and yet it would be sin in me to die. Ah, husband, husband ! thou that liest here under the flowers and the sky, I would to Heaven that I could lie down beside thee now, and never wake ! I trust thou dost not know this thing that troubles me, and threatens mine and thine, or thy dear heart would be wrung with pity, although thou wert an angel and in eternal bliss. And but that the Almighty has fixed his canon against self-slaughter—— Those were happy days in which I first read that ! ” mused she, interrupting herself, and carried involuntarily into another current of thought ; “ we read it together, you and I, Robert. My new life was just beginning then ; never had pupil such a kindly teacher as thou wert. I can bear to think of that ; but of thy love, thy noble generous love, thy patient tenderness—— Spare me, great Heaven ; I did so worship this dead man, and now I live alone ; and yet I would not have him here alive, to know what I know, to feel what I feel, to dread what I dread—no, not though we should be permitted to live together for years, and die within the self-same hour, as I used to pray we might. I thank thee, merciful God, that I am bearing this heavy cross alone ; give me strength to carry it, and suffer me to do so—if it please thee—to the end, alone. It is my fault, husband ; all mine. When you pressed me to marry you, and I said ‘ No,’ I should have said it more firmly. We were not fit for one another.—No, no ; not that ! I will not say that. You made me what I am ; a wife fit for yourself, I do believe ; not good, like you—not wise, like you—but one who was a faithful and true helpmate, and with whom you were content. If you could make a sign to me from the earth, or in the air, this moment, I should not be afraid but that it would be one of love. If you, perchance, have come to know every thought in my heart that was in your time—or if you have read it since you died—or if you read it now—still I should not be afraid ! I will endeavour to do my duty still ; but

ah ! how foolish are they who say we always know what is our duty ! Oh Robert, what is mine ? ”

She wrung her hands in pitiful distraction, and throwing herself down by the graveside, whispered, as though to the deaf ear beneath : “ The sea has given up its dead to shame me, and thy children, because of me. What is there for me to do for them except to die ? ”

“ Hollo, missus ! what’s wrong wi’ *you* ? ” inquired a deep hoarse voice. “ Drunk or sober, I never could abide seeing a woman cry.”

At such a time and place, the sudden and unexpected interruption might well have sent a shudder to any woman’s heart, and it was no wonder that my lady trembled in every limb. But she gathered herself together with a great effort, and drawing her thick crape veil over her face, arose, and steadily confronted the intruder.

“ Why, it’s my lady herself ! ” cried the new-comer, derisively—“ the party as I’ve promised myself a good look at before I left these diggings. And, dam’mee, but now I’ll have it. If I’m anyways rude, you will please to put it down to the brandy in which I have been drinking to the very good health of the big black horse. Now, don’t be so cursedly proud ; your son and I—not Sir Richard, for he’s a—— Well, you’re his mother, so I won’t say what I was agoing to about *him* ; but Master Walter, he and I are great friends.—Now, why do you wince ? *He* aint so high and mighty but that he can borrow money of your humble servant ; but there—there’s no obligation in that, for I love the lad. He’s like—like a dear friend of mine, who was drowned in the sea, years and years ago. Lord, how you do tremble ! Why, I’m the last man in the world to hurt a woman, bless you. My nature is altogether soft where they’re concerned ; and if it were not so, there was a woman once, my lady, drowned and dead—the same as I was speaking of—for whose sake every woman since has been in my eyes sort of sacred-like ; that is, unless I was in drink.”

It was painfully evident to my lady that the person who was speaking to her was in the unhappy condition he had just referred to, for he lurched from side to side until he had bethought him of steadyng himself by the marble cross; but there was a sort of pathos in his voice, too, which was not the mere maudlin tenderness of the drunkard. If he had not been drunk, he might not have been tender, but there was evidently genuine feeling in the man, which seemed to deepen as he went on. "Now, though you do not speak, I know you're sorry for me. If I should lift your veil—there, I'm not agoing to do it—I am sure you would have a tear for a poor fellow who has been knocked about the world for three parts of his life, and has not made a single friend—not one, not one; and if he went back home, who would not see a face he knew—it is so long ago that he was there—and who needs a woman's voice to comfort him if ever a man did."

"What's all this to me, Sir?" asked my lady in low and broken tones. "I wish to be left alone here—by this grave."

"What—is—all—this—to *you*?" returned the man with vindictive deliberation. "Have you no heart, then, you proud woman, like your eldest son?" Then once more altering his manner, he continued: "Now, do not be angry with me, or you may be sorry for it, but rather pity me. This grave contains what is dear to you, it seems; but you have those alive who love you also! Now, I have not even a grave. The only creature on earth who ever loved *me*—and I loved her too, ah how dearly, though I could not keep even then from drink—she lies buried beneath the stormy waves. I cannot come, as you can, to this tomb, and say: 'Here she sleeps,' and weep over it, and be sorry for my sins, for I know not where, in all the waste of ocean, her bones may lie. So, for many years I never looked upon the sea without the sense that I was looking upon one great grave. Am I speaking truth or not?"

He stopped and clutched her by the arm, and fiercely bade her tell him if she believed his words or no.

"I do believe you, Sir," returned my lady, firmly. "Beneath your bronzed and bearded face, I see your woes at work, and I am sorry for you."

"Thank you, lady; you have a pleasant and kind voice, with music in it such as I have not heard for many a day. You are sorry for me, but you know not half my woes; I have never told them to any human ear; although at times, when I have been all alone—upon the treeless prairie, not knowing whether I was on the right track or lost, or on the mountain-top in strange and savage lands, and chiefly when a solitary man on shipboard, keeping watch while others slept—then have I spoken of these things aloud, and asked of Heaven why it used me so. But now—as some black cloud will overpass a mighty plain, and never shed a drop, but presently, on coming on a little valley fenced with round green hills, will straight dissolve in rain, so I, who have been so silent for so long, am moved to speak by you. What magic is this you bear about you, woman? Let me see your face."

"There is no need for that Sir," answered my lady, stepping back, and motioning with her arm with dignity. "The magic of which you speak lies only in a feeling heart and an attentive ear. If it is any comfort to you to tell your story, I will gladly listen to it."

"Yes, it seems to be a comfort," replied the other, thoughtfully, "although I never cared to speak of it before. You see me, lady, now, a brawling, drunken wretch—upon whose reckless soul there may be murder, to-morrow or next day, as like as not—but anyhow a broken man. I was not always thus. When I was young, I was a hopeful and hard-working lad enough—only a little thoughtless. I was honest, too, notwithstanding that the law and I fell out; but I was fond of jovial company and good liquor, and what I got at sea—for I had a smack of my own at Bleamouth—that I spent

very quickly on shore. If I had had a wife, or even a mother, I think it might have been different ; but I had no relations, or at least none who were my friends. I could not bear advice, and much less interference and dictation, and so, you see, I was alone in the world—until I met with Lucy Meade— You shiver, my lady. Am I keeping you too long in the night-air ? ”

Lady Lisgard shook her head, and murmured : “ No ; go on.”

“ Tis thirty years ago this very year—that’s many thousand days, and tens of thousand leagues have I sailed since then—and yet, I swear, it seems but yesterday I crossed those water-meadows with my gun—for I was after moorfowl—and came upon her cottage on the Blea. White-walled, white-roofed—for in those parts they paint them so—it nestled under a rocky hill, crested with heather ; and in front the river ran, swollen with recent rains, through a broad weedy flat, and so, between the rounded sand-hills, to the sea. Before the cottage was a porch with honeysuckles trained upon it, and one full-flowering fuchsia upon either side. Then, as I drew near, I saw her sitting in the porch mending her father’s net. Ah, Heaven, I see her now ! ”

The speaker paused and sighed ; but looking out into the viewless air, as if upon some picture hung in space, he did not mark my lady start and clasp her hands, as though some dreadfi l thing had come upon her suddenly, against which none could help her but only God alone.

“ It is a story, Lady Lisgard, that you doubtless know,” continued the man, “ for even among lords and ladies love will come. I asked her for a drink of water, and she brought me with it Hope, Resolve, Repentance—I know not what. From that moment forth, I lived my life anew. Then the next day, and the next, I sought the cottage ; and when I had won my way with Lucy—that was her name, my lady—did I tell you ? —I pleaded my cause with the old fisherman, her father—her mother being already ours—but for a long time in vain.

"She was his only child, his only prop and stay, and he was proud of her, as well he might have been, for she was gentle of speech as you yourself or any lady born, and scholarly and wise beyond her humble state, and, young as she was, already had had many a suitor ; but she had never loved but me. 'Tis like enough you cannot fancy that ; but then my former self was not like this."

He pointed to his heart with a scornful gesture, as though something loathsome had taken the place of what had wont to be there.

"Besides, the fairest, purest creature upon earth was she, and she took all things for pure. Not that there was much against me either, except that I loved good liquor ; besides, I only drank for pleasure, then, and now—But let that be. Well, we were married. We lived with the old couple at the cottage, as Lucy wished, partly for their sakes, partly, as I have often thought since then, for mine—that I might be kept out of bad company, such as there was plenty of at Bleamouth at that time—poachers, smugglers, and idlers of all sorts. But this was done too late. I have said that the law and I fell out : that was for poaching—and curse the law, say I, which rich men make for the poor perforce to break. I never poached after I married, but before that time I had shot a hare or two ; and once—but months ago—there had been a fray with keepers, and I had clubbed my gun, and struck my hardest, like the rest. There had been broken bones on both sides, but the matter had blown over, as I thought, when all of a sudden I received certain news that I was marked for one of the offenders, and that men were coming to take me from my Lucy's arms to jail. I told her this, for I had kept nothing from her all along, and I knew that she had courage, or she would never have married such a man as me ; but I forgot, in my selfish roughness, that it is one thing to be brave in things that concern one's self, and another to be able to bear to see others suffer. 'Ah, Heaven !' exclaimed she, 'but this will kill my father ! To have his honest house entered by

men in search of felons, and to see his daughter's husband with the gyves upon him—that will be his death, I know.' The auld wife said so likewise.

"They were right, I think, for when we came to break the thing to him, and warn him of what might happen, although all was said to excuse what I had done, and to soften the consequences that might come of it, he raved like one distracted. 'Let him leave my cottage!' cried he; 'he has worked mischief enough already; he has robbed me of my daughter's love, and now he would take from me my good name. Let him leave this honest roof!' 'But where he goes, I must go, father,' replied Lucy, with her arms about the old man's neck; and in the end he was brought to see that it must be so. So I changed my name to that of Derrick, which I bear now, and fled from home to a great seaport, and there, on board an emigrant-ship bound for the other side of the world, took passage not only for myself and wife, but for her parents. It was agreed that all were to begin life again in a strange land, so that I, too, might begin it once more with that fair start which I had lost in my own country. Thus the poor old man and his wife were torn from the comfortable home that had sheltered them for half a century, and forced in their old age to cross the seas. No, not to cross them: would to Heaven they might have been suffered so to do! It was ordained that I, who had thus far caused their wretchedness, should also be the means of their death. A most terrible storm overtook us at midnight, while yet in sight of lights on English land, and in the midst of it our vessel sprung a leak. I knew that I had a brave woman for my wife, but then I found she was a heroine; I knew my Lucy was good as she was fair, but then she proved herself an angel. There were men on board who screamed and wailed like children. She never uttered a cry or shed a tear. She felt that she was going to heaven with all she loved (for she always thought the best of everyone), and therefore death had no terrors for her. But I—I felt myself a murderer. I did what I could to

save the two old people, and got them into the only boat that left the ship ; but it had not parted from us twice its length, before it capsized before our eyes.

Lucy had refused to leave me, and when the vessel began to sink, I lashed her to a spar, and then myself ; and so for a little time we floated. But the great waves drenched us through and through, and dashed upon us so that we had hardly time to breathe. The spar was not large enough for both our weights, which sank it too low in the water ; and so I secretly unloosed the cords that fastened me, and clambered to my Lucy's side, and kissed her cold wet cheek, and whispered : ‘Farewell, Lucy.’”

Here the speaker paused, and covered his rough face. My lady, too, was deeply moved. For near a minute, neither spoke. Then the man resumed : “I slipped into the sea, and struck out aimlessly enough, but with the instinct of a swimmer. Fool that I was to wish to live !” Again he paused ; but this time, to mutter an execration.

“And did not all your care and unselfish love suffice to save her ?” asked the listener, tenderly.

“No, lady. She was drowned. I never expected otherwise in such a sea. The whole ship's company were lost, except myself. When nearly spent, I came upon a huge piece of the wreck, and held on to it till daylight, when I found myself at sea. I would to God that it had not been so ! I was nearer heaven at that time than I have ever been since, and I ought to have perished then, when all which made life precious had already gone : it would have been far better to have died with her, than to live without her. But I did live. After two days and three nights of hunger and thirst, a vessel picked me up, a sodden mass of rags, half-dead and half-mad. They nursed me and made me well—it was a cruel kindness—and after many days, I was able to tell them what had happened. ‘Ay, then,’ said they, ‘the pilot was right who came to us off Falmouth. It was the *North Star* that went to pieces in the storm ; you are the sole survivor, man, of all on board. Nothing came on

shore that night, or could have come on such a coast as that, save spars and corpses.'"

There was silence for a minute's space: the strong man's chest laboured in vain to give him breath for utterance; in vain his horny hand dashed the big tears from his brown cheeks; they still rained on. "Alas, poor man!" said my lady, in a broken and pitiful voice, "I feel for you from my very soul. And when you found your three-weeks' bride was dead—I think you said you had married her but three weeks—what then became of *you*?"

"What matters?" asked the man half angrily. "It mattered nothing even to myself. The vessel took me—it was all one to me whither she was bound—to New SouthWales. And in the New World I did indeed begin a new life—but it was a far worse one than in the old. I was reckless, hopeless already, and I was not long in becoming godless. When that is said, a man's history is the same, wherever he lives, whatever he does, and however he ends."

He stamped his foot upon the ground, as though he would keep down some rising demon, and his voice once more resumed the hoarseness it had exchanged for something almost plaintive throughout his story.

"Ralph, Ralph," began my lady, reprovingly, and touching his rough sailor's sleeve with her gloved hand—

"And how the devil should you know my name is Ralph?" interrupted the other in blank amazement.

"My maid, Mary Forest, told me it was Ralph," returned my lady, calmly.

"Did she? Well, that's no reason why *you* should call me by it. However, since you seem to feel so unexpected an interest in your humble servant, I will make bold to ask a favour of you." His manner was rough and defiant as ever now, like that of a sturdy vagrant soliciting alms of a defenceless woman.

"You are angry with yourself," said my lady, quietly, "for having given way to feelings which do you honour;

that is a base sort of regret indeed. You try to persuade yourself that I have affected a sympathy which I did not feel, but you do not succeed. I cannot but be interested in one who, with all his faults, has certainly in the hour of death and danger behaved nobly, and who must, I feel assured, have the seeds of good in him yet, despite his wild and despairing talk."

"No, woman, I have not," returned the man with vehemence. "Dismiss that from your mind at once. Ralph Derrick is no hypocrite, whatever he is, and he tells you now that he is a lost man, in the sense which such as you understand it. I don't know why I have spoken to you as I have done just now—some springs of feeling that I had deemed were quite dried up flowed at your voice as they have not done these thirty years—but don't imagine that I am soft-hearted. I am not a bad fellow when I'm sober, and not put out; but then I'm seldom sober, and I'm very easily put out. Your son, Sir Richard, has put me out, for one. I should be sorry for him if he and I had much to do with one another.—But there, you need not turn so pale; for, for your sake—and for Mr. Walter's sake, who has got my Lucy's eyes, and look, and voice, God bless him—Sir Richard is safe from me; albeit I have let fly a bullet before now at men who have wronged me less than he has done—an insolent young devil! It was a man like him, one of your land-owners, forsooth, whose persecution drove me from my native shore, and drowned my wife and the old couple. Damn all such tyrants, says Ralph Derrick —"

It was difficult to associate the depressed and solemn speaker of a few minutes back with this passionate and lawless man, his huge fingers opening and shutting in nervous excitement, his eyeballs suffused with blood, and each hair of his vast beard, as it seemed, bristling with vengeful fury.

"You were saying that you wished to ask a favour of me, Mr. Derrick?" interposed my lady, quietly. "What is it I can do for you?"

"Well, you can do this," returned he, roughly : "you can cease to set your waiting-maid, Mary, against me, as you have hitherto done. I am not a bad match for her, as she knows, in point of money ; and if she finds herself able to put up with little starts of temper, and not to grudge me a drop o' drink at times, why, what is that to you ?"

"Have you told her, may I ask, of what you have been telling *me*, Mr. Derrick ?"

"Yes ; at least I told her I was a widower ; I never felt a call to tell her more ; she would not understand, look you. She asked me what this leaden locket was I wear about my neck, with this poor broken piece of stick in it, and something withered clinging to it still, and I told her it was a charm against the ague. Now, you—I'll wager you can tell me what it holds."

"No, not I. How should *I* know ?" inquired my lady, hurriedly.

"You *do* know, anyway. This fellow is not the sort of man to carry charms, you think ; and all that's sacred to him in the world or out of it hangs on his love that's drowned. This, then, must be some token—were there not fuchsias upon either side the porch where first they met ? There, now, you have it, I can see."

"You plucked, perhaps, a piece of fuchsia when you plighted troth," murmured my lady.

"Ay, when we plighted troth," answered the other, mournfully ; "and breaking a twig in twain, all blossoming then, but now—see, dried to dust—each kept a half. I have seen far up the hills in Mexico a piece of the true Cross, that's held to be the richest possession that the Church calls her own in those parts ; well, that's not sure ; it may be or it mayn't be what they term it ; but this poor twig has never been out of my sight or reach, and so I kiss and worship this, my relic, as no devotee can do.—Now, what would Mary Forest say to that ? She is not like my Lucy ; no, indeed, no more than I am like the Ralph of those old days ; and if she were, should I be

fit for her? My Lucy married to a drunken, gambling ruffian! 'Tis blasphemy to think upon it. But as for this wench, your waiting-maid, she and I are suited well enough. She wants a husband, and is willing to take me; while I, who have been tossed so long on the stormy billows of life, shall be glad to come to anchor. It is you only—she told me so herself—who stand in the way."

"And would you have me, then, advise this woman—being my faithful friend as well as my servant—to unite her fortunes with a man who, from his own lips I learn, is hopeless, reckless, Godless, a drunkard and a gambler——"

"Hell and Furies!" broke forth the other impatiently, "will you dare to use what I have just now told you against myself! Beware, beware, proud woman, how you cross a desperate man! Since my life is worthless, as you paint it, you may be sure that I shall hold the risk of losing it lighter than better men: there is nothing that I dare not do to those who cross me."

"I have no fear for myself, Sir, and least of all things, Ralph Derrick, do I fear death," answered my lady, calmly. "Yet willingly I promise that I will never breathe one syllable to human ear of what you have said to-night."

"So far so well, my lady. When I found you here, I was on my way to court your waiting-woman, but she does not expect me. She has written me her answer 'Yes' or 'No' before this, and I shall get it to-morrow in London: it was agreed between us she should do so. I was to have started to town this afternoon, but I overslept myself—not but that I got up early enough, as Master Walter will witness—and missed the train from Dalwynch. I am going thither to-night; but, in the meantime, I thought I could come back and take a farewell kiss from Mary, and her 'Yes' from her own lips. I will receive no other answer, and if such should reach me, I shall know from whom it comes. The matter is in your hands, I know; come, let us part friends."

"God forbid we should part enemies," replied my lady, fervently; "I will wrong you in nothing, but be assured I shall do my duty at all hazards."

"And be assured I shall have my way, Lady Lisgard, at all risks," returned the other, grimly. "Are you too proud to take my hand at parting?"

For a single instant, my lady hesitated; then reaching out her fingers, they met his own stretched out at fullest length, for the tomb lay between them. They shook hands across Sir Robert Lisgard's grave.





CHAPTER XIV.

ONCE MORE IN MY LADY'S CHAMBER.

AS my lady left the churchyard by the wicket-gate, she caught the flutter of a female dress that flitted on before her, and vanished in the regions belonging to the domestics. Was it possible that anybody had been a witness to her late interview, or worse, a listener to the conversation? It was in the highest degree improbable, but not impossible. By crouching down behind the low stone wall, next Sir Robert's tomb, a person in the Abbey grounds, without doubt, could have overheard, and even with caution, might have watched them. It chilled my lady's heart to think of it. Yet what could be more unlikely? What servant of hers would have ventured upon such an outrage? Could Mary Forest have so far forgotten herself, actuated by an irrepressible curiosity to hear what her mistress and her lover could have to say to one another at that strange time and place? It was much more probable that some domestic about to use the short-cut through the churchyard, had seen her coming from it, and hastened back, to avoid a meeting. At the same time, the suspicion added to my lady's troubles.

These were serious and pressing enough already, Heaven help her! and yet, urgent and perilous as they were, it was not of them that she first thought when she

found herself once more in her own room. There are no circumstances, however tremendous, which have power to quench the susceptibilities of women : their feelings must have way, no matter how dangerous the indulgence in them, how immediate the necessity for action. The meshes of a net which threatened destruction to herself and all that were dear to her were closing in around Lady Lisgard, and, calm as she looked, she knew it well—well as the wily salmon that poises motionless, and seemingly unconscious of his peril, in the red pool, below which the fisherman has set the spreading snare ; but my lady turns her back for a little upon the tide of woes that is setting in upon her—a spring-tide that may reach Heaven knows how far—and seeks the inland past. It is the last time that she will ever visit it, and therefore she cannot choose but linger there a while, and shed some bitter tears. Her door is locked, for none must see her wishing “Good-bye,” and the windows are wide open to the air, which blows the flame of her reading-lamp hither and thither. She needs air, poor lady. A waft of wind that has swept some snowy steppe would have been grateful to her throbbing brow that April night ; as for light, a very little is enough for her purpose. Those few old letters she is reading, taken from a secret drawer in my lady's desk, are as familiar to her as her prayers, and she seems to hold them almost as sacred. Yet one is not even a letter, but only a piece of folded notepaper, torn at the creases, and yellow—nay, yellower than mere age could possibly have turned it. It has been damaged by sea-water. Within it are two locks of hair, quite white, and a few words in faded ink, *Frank Meade* and *Rachel Meade*, with a date of five-and-thirty years ago.

She takes out the silver tresses, and looking on them reverently for a few moments, kisses them, and puts them back in the secret drawer—but not the writing ; that she holds above the lamp until it has caught fire, and watches it until it is quite consumed, and the last spark has gone out. Then she brings forth from the same hiding-place

two letters, evidently both by the same hand—a very unclerkly one—ill-spelled and ill-composed, but which have been to her more dear than any written words for a quarter of a century ; for they were letters of a dead man, the one when he was her accepted lover, the other after he became her husband. They are letters of the dead no longer ; for he who was thought to have died is still alive, and being so, has become an enemy more terrible than any who should seek her life ; one who, by simply saying : “This is my wife,” would thereby dishonour her, disgrace her children, and even shame the memory of that righteous man whose tomb she had just visited, and wept over with such honest tears. And yet with tenderness, though mixed with a certain awe and shrinking, does my lady look upon those time-worn words, notwithstanding that the sacredness of death is no longer on them. The first is what is called a love-letter, a note filled with foolish fondness, expressed with vehemence, but without coarseness ; the second a tissue of passionate self-reproaches ; the writer accusing himself of bringing a curse upon her happy home in having married her ; then stating, as though reluctantly, certain arrangements he had made at the sea-port, from which his communication was dated, for the passage of herself and parents by the *North Star*. Both are signed *Ralph Gavestone*.

“So loving and so penitent,” murmurs she. “Time cannot surely have worked so ill with such a nature as he would have me believe ! When he first sang that carol to my ear, I thought it might have been an angel singing :

O'er the hill and o'er the vale
Come three kings together.

Alas, alas ! to think with what terror I heard him sing it the last time. He may not be more changed within, perhaps, than he is without ; since, notwithstanding what he said about his looks, I knew him again the first moment my eye lit upon him on yonder lawn. I wonder whether he would have known *me*, supposing he had

snatched away my veil. Merciful Heaven, what a risk was that! nay, is not every moment that he remains at Mirk a risk? What if he heard the name of Gavestone coupled with mine? I am sure he recognised something in my voice, although I disguised it all I could. He must never come back hither—never, never! He must be as dead to me now as I deemed him to be before. God knows I pity him from the bottom of my heart: and also”—here she paused—“yes, and also that I do not love him—no, not him, although I love the man that wrote these words. I never concealed it, no, never, from my—Sir Robert himself. I said: ‘I have no love to give you,’ all along; ‘only respect, devotion, duty.’ And those, Heaven knows, I gave. If all together, and a hundred other gracious feelings added, could have made up love, then Sir Robert would have had that; but they can *not*. He knew it, noble heart, and was content. He knew that in that drawer I kept these very things that came on shore with me when—Oh, Ralph, Ralph, Ralph!” My lady shook with sobs; and then, in her agony, mistaking the noise of her own passion for some interruption from without, started up from the desk on which she had thrown herself, and listened.

Nothing was to be heard save a faint peal of laughter from the croquet-ground, where Walter and the two young ladies were endeavouring to play by lantern-light—a frolic she had heard them planning at dinner-time. Yet even that slight tidings from the world without recalled her to the present. “I must burn all proofs,” she murmured, as though repeating some authoritative command of another rather than any determination of her own. Then with a steady hand she took the letters, and burned them to the last atom, reading the words with greediness, as though, as the flame consumed them one by one, the remainder had grown more precious, like the Sibyl’s books. There was more to try her yet. The last thing which the little drawer contained had yet to be brought forth—a leaden locket, the facsimile of the one which

Derrick had just shown to her in the churchyard. Within, although almost, as he had expressed it, “dried to dust,” was a tiny sprig of wood. She emptied this into the hollow of her hand, and instantly the wind whirled all away. My lady uttered a low moan of anguish, then sat with the poor token in her hand, which, worthless and vacant as it was, yet, to her streaming eyes, held all the treasure of her youth. “Alas, alas, for the time that is no more!” cried she. “Who could have thought that I, with my own hand, should destroy this precious pledge? Kind Heaven, direct me—teach me what it is right to do! Till death should part us did I swear to cherish him; and now, though we both live, alone he roves the world. It may be I should win him back to his former self, and save a soul alive. He has loved me always—always; and he loves me now, although he deems I have lain beneath the waves these thirty years, and although he seeks—— But that shall never be. I will tell Mary Forest rather to her face: ‘I myself am married to this man whom you would wed.’ He shall not bring another sin upon himself and shame on her, and——Ah, Heaven help me; what is that which I should do in this sad strait?”

It was terrible to see my lady’s look of woe, as rising from her chair, she paced the room, and now prayed Heaven for aid, and now stood listening to the mirth that still broke in from out of doors by fits, and now gazed fixedly upon the little leaden case within her hand, as though there were some magic help in *that*. “Farewell, Lucy,” murmured she; “the last words that I ever thought to hear him say, which, having said, he dropped, to save my life, into the wave. And now I see him storm-tossed in the sea of sin, certain to sink, without a plank but this poor ancient love of his to which to cling, and yet I may not stretch a finger forth to aid him. Ah me, what base return! Why did I not cleave to him, although I thought him dead, as he to me? Why was I not faithful to his memory, as he to mine? Why say: ‘In three years’ time, Sir Robert, if your fancy still holds firm, I

will be yours ?' Why not repeat that 'No' I gave him first ? Then, earning my own living as I was born to earn it, I might have lived on alone until this day, when, meeting with my poor lost Ralph once more, I could, without a blush of shame, cry 'Husband !' and be to him indeed the guardian angel his love paints I was. Heaven knows, I wish it for his sake alone. I wish for nothing for myself but death—yes, that would be best of all, a thousand times."

My lady's once plump face looked pinched and worn, almost as though the shadow for which she sighed was really nigh ; her anxious eyes, not softened by her tears, peered timorous as a hare's to left and right, as though the tenantless room held some one who could read her secret soul. Then sitting down upon the sofa, with her hands clenched before her, she stared out upon the twilight, deepening down upon the windmill on the hill. But presently, "Forgive me these black thoughts," prayed she with inward shudder. "If, as they say, the place reserved for the wicked is filled with those who have promised themselves to do some good, and have not done it, then haply those who in their minds revolve some deadly sin which they do not commit, may be forgiven. I will not, with God's blessing, thus transgress again. I *know* that that is wrong, and prompted by the devil ; but which is right and which is wrong in this" (once more her eyes fell piteously upon the locket in her hand)—"Lord, help me in this trial."

Here Walter's ringing voice was heard upon the lawn beneath : "Never mind pulling up the rings, Letty ; they are the best burglar-trap a householder can lay ; only bring in the mallets and balls."

"My Walter !" exclaimed my lady, starting up with haste. "Have I forgotten *you*, then ? My proud Sir Richard, too, disgraced, dishonoured, shall men call you bastard ? My sweet Letty—never, never, never !" As though she dared not trust herself to think, she kept repeating that sad word : then thrusting the dear token in

the centre of the wood and coals that were laid in the fireplace ready for the match, she set all alight.

"Better for one to suffer than for three," she muttered to herself. "The die is cast. I am my lady still. I would my heart could melt away like this dull lead, and weigh me down no more, and with this last relic of the past, that every thought of it might likewise perish. It can never be, I know. While this my life still holds—a life of lies, a whitened sepulchre—this sting will never lose its venom—never, never!—Shade of the dead," cried she, with vehemence, turning toward the old church-tower, which stood up black against the rising moon, "I charge you, witness what I do for you and yours! Here, in this flame, I sacrifice not only this poor token, but the man that was my husband; nay, who *is*, the man that I once loved, nay, whom I love now; the man that laid his life down for my sake, with those two words, just 'Farewell, Lucy.' Great Heaven, is not this enough? Surely, now all will go well—save for him and me. Is this too much to ask? . . . Forgive, forgive: I know not what I said. Teach me to be humble, patient under every blow, and no more vain regrets. I must act at once. What did Arthur say? 'The matter lay in my own hands,' said he, whether this man should stay at Mirk or not. How little did he know with what truth he spoke! And I must speak to Mary without delay, for that I alone could stop her marriage with this man. How true again? Well, I will do it."

Then my lady washed her swollen eyes, and smoothed her hair, all tangled and escaped from its sober bonds, unturned the door-key, and having rung her bell, awaited, with the lamp so placed that it threw her face in shadow, the coming of her waiting-maid.



CHAPTER XV.

MISTRESS AND MAID.

“**M**ARY,” said Lady Lisgard gravely, when her attendant had closed the door behind her, “I want to have a little serious talk with you to-night.”

“As you please, my lady,” returned Mistress Forest, in a tone which the other did not fail to mark : it was a very respectful tone—a more humble one even than she was ordinarily wont to use—but there was a certain deliberation and set resolve about it too, which expressed, as decidedly as though she had used the words : “I am ready to listen, Madam ; but I know very well what you are going to ask me and I have made up my mind already to answer ‘No.’”

“Mary,” continued my lady earnestly, but not without a tremor in her kind soft voice, “come and sit here on the sofa beside me, and let us not be mistress and maid to-night, but only friends.”

“Yes, Madam ;” and Mary’s voice trembled too, for this unlooked-for arrangement would place her, she knew, at a disadvantage in the argument which was certainly at hand. “We have known one another many, many years, Mary—more than half our lives—and I don’t think we have had a single quarrel yet.”

“Not one, Ma’am, not one,” assented the waiting-

maid ; already, after the manner of her susceptible kind, beginning to cry.

"I can remember you when quite a child, Mary ; not fifteen years old ; as willing and kind-hearted a girl as the sun ever shone upon ; and when I had not a friend in the world, nor even so much as a coin that I could call my own, and when I was weak and sick at heart, having lost all that was dear to me, I remember who it was that tended and caressed me as though I was her own sister."

"Don't ye, don't ye, my lady ; hush, hush !" cried the weeping Mary. "It was only natural that I should take to a sweet innocent creature cast at our very door by the raging sea. I often dream of that storm o' nights, Madam, even now ; of the thunder, and the lightning, and the rain ; and of the flashes that were not lightning, but signals for help—that, alas ! we could not give—from the poor doomed ship. And how father and the other fishermen, and many of the visitors themselves—and among them poor Sir Robert—all crowded down to the Cove, for they could not get nearer to the shore because of the waves ; and I was with them, sheltering myself in the brushwood as well as I could, and peering through the branches to see the great white waves lit up for an instant, and then the darkness shutting all things out except the roaring of the storm. I mind it just as though it were but yesterday ; and ah ! my lady, shall I ever forget when that one great wave dashed up into the very Cove itself, wetting us all to the skin, and knocking down young Jack West, whom it almost carried back with it in its return, and then the great black spar, which it did carry back, with something white a-clinging to it ; when my father cried out : 'Oh my God, a woman !' and all our hearts seemed stricken with a sudden shoot of pain. Lord ! how I cried, for my part, to think that a poor creature should be tossing in that dreadful foam ; and when I heard good Sir Robert's voice, clear and loud as a bugle : 'One hundred pounds to the man who brings her ashore, dead or alive !' I do believe I could have run

out and kissed him. Ah, my lady, what a noble gentleman he was ; for though he could not have known how dear you were to be to him—you might have been an old woman, for all he could see—how he worked and strove to save you ; not by his money alone, for no mere gain would have tempted men to do what was done that night, but by risking life and limb. They made a double chain, holding one another's hands, for there was no time to spare for ropes, and went down almost among the breakers, where you were : my father and Sir Robert were the two first men, God bless them."

Here Mistress Forest paused, interrupted by incipient hysterics, and my lady herself cried like a child, but not in agony ; her tears were tribute to the memory of a gallant deed.

"I mind my father had a black shoulder—a place you could not cover with both your hands—all along of the spar being driven up against him, but they carried it up with you upon it safe into the Cove, and then there was a great cry for us women to come down and help. Ah, how beautiful you looked, my lady, though we thought you dead, white, and cold, and wet, with your long black hair dripping like sea-weed, and your tender limbs all bruised and bleeding. It must have been a kind hand as tied you to the plank, for between your dainty waist and the rough rope there was bound a sailor's jacket."

My lady moaned, and held her hands up as though she would say, "Forbear !" but Mistress Forest could not be stayed.

"There was little enough clothes upon you, poor lady, just a bodice and a petticoat, but round your neck there was hung a charm or two, and perhaps that had some hand in saving you from drowning."

My lady looked quickly up ; how strange it seemed that the comment passed by Mary Forest upon the locket (and the bundle of letters in their little waterproof case) should have been so exactly what Derrick had pointed out it would be. The coincidence reminded her of the

task that lay before her, and of the danger of delaying it.

"Yes, Mary, I indeed owe my life to you and yours, and I am not forgetful of the debt. Your welfare is, and ever will be, only second in importance to that of my own children, and it is concerning it that I now wish to speak with you. Your future——"

"You owe me nothing, my dear lady, that you have not paid again and again, I am sure," interrupted the waiting-maid hurriedly. "When you rose to that high station, for which it seems to everybody you were born, your hand was always held out to me; through good report and evil report, you have ever stood my friend: it will be a great wrench of my heart, dearest mistress, when I leave your service—as I shall have to do, I fear, very soon."

"Mary!"

"Yes, my lady. You see I'm not a young girl now; and it is not everybody who has so good a chance as I have now of—of—settling in life. Service is not inheritance, you know, my lady, although I am well aware I should never want for nothing——"

"Whether I live or die, Mary," broke in her mistress eagerly, "I have taken care of that, good friend; and if I should die to-morrow—— But you shall see my will itself, for it lies here."

She laid her hand upon the desk before her, but Mary checked her with a determined "No, my lady; no. I was never greedy—with all my faults, you will grant that much, I know—and if I had been like Mrs. Welsh, and others of this household I could name—but that I never was a mischief-maker—I might long since have put myself beyond all need of legacies, and you never would have missed it. But Mr. Derrick is himself a person of property; a very rich man indeed for one in my condition of life—not that I need be a burden upon any man, thank Heaven, for I have money saved out of my wages—and very handsome they always were—and that

great present of good Sir Robert's still untouched : the most generous of gentlemen he was. I am sure, my lady, nobody felt for you as I did when Sir Robert died ; and you have often said how terrible it was to lose a husband ; therefore"—here for a moment her excessive volubility flagged for the first time ; she paused, and reddened, then added, with the air of a mathematician stating an indisputable corollary—"therefore, you must allow, dear mistress, that to *find* one—particularly when one comes to my time of life—is not unpleasant, nor a chance to be lightly thrown aside."

"That depends entirely upon the sort of husband he may be, Mary," observed my lady gravely.

"Really, dear Madam, with all respect, I think I am the best judge of that," rejoined the waiting-maid tartly ; "although; indeed, I never thought to say such words to you. Sir Richard may have his likes and dislikes, but I am not his slave ; nor yet his servant, for the matter of that. While Master Walter, who, saving your presence, everybody knows to be worth a hundred of him, likes Ralph very much."

A pang shot across my lady's face, and left it crimson, as though she had received a blow ; but the waiting-maid little knew what had brought the colour there, although she felt that she had pained her mistress deeply.

"God forgive me," cried she penitently, "if my foolish tongue has hurt your feelings, my lady. I did not mean to say aught against Sir Richard, I am sure. I scarcely knew what I said, for when those who are dear to us—as Ralph has grown to be with me, and I don't deny it—are misjudged and wronged, why, then we are apt to say bitter things. This talk was none of my seeking, my lady ; and although Ralph thinks that you are to blame because of his being forbidden the Hall, and all the rest of it, I have always told him you have never said a word to set me against him ; and oh, I am sorry you are doing it now, because what is done cannot be undone, and——"

"Great Heaven! you are not married to this man?" cried my lady, rising from her seat with agitation.

"Oh no, my lady—certainly not, my lady," rejoined the waiting-maid with a certain demure dignity. "There has been nothing underhand between us in the matter at all, except, that is, so far as meeting Mr. Derrick at the back gate—"

"Did you go out to meet him *to-night?*" inquired Lady Lisgard sharply, and keeping her eyes fixed steadily upon her attendant's face.

"No, Madam, I did not."

"She is speaking truth," murmured my lady to herself. "Who, then, could it be whom I saw upon the church-yard path just now?"

"Although," continued Mrs. Forest quietly, "I don't deny that I have often met him after dusk, no other time being permitted to us: but to-day he has gone to town."

"And you are to write to him thither to give him your final decision as to whether you will become his wife or not."

"How on earth do you know that, my lady?" inquired the waiting-maid with a curiosity even beyond her indignation.

"I *do* know it, dear old friend," answered Lady Lisgard tenderly, "and it is because of that knowledge that I have sent for you to-night, to strive to persuade you to write 'No,' while there is yet time."

It was very seldom—not once in a year perhaps—that Mary Forest was ever out of temper with my lady; but then such a supreme occasion as the present had never occurred before. Underneath their mere superficial relation of mistress and servant, they were more like elder and younger sister; but then even sisters quarrel when the one wants the other—generally under some pretence of mere prudence, not to be listened to by a woman of spirit—to give up the man of her choice. The ample countenance of Mistress Forest expressed something more than decision in the negative; there was an un-

pleasant smile upon her pale lips, which seemed to say : “If you knew what I know, you would know that you are wasting your breath.” She sat with her plump hands folded before her, like a naughty boy who has been put in the corner, but who does not care—nay, more, who knows that he has got a cracker to put presently under his master’s chair, the results of which will make full amends for the inconvenience he at present experiences.

“I will say nothing more, Mary, of the mutual esteem and affection between us two, and of the pain that an eternal parting—such as your marriage with this Mr. Derrick would most undoubtedly entail—needs must cost us both. I presume that you have weighed that matter in your mind, and found it—however weighty—in-sufficient to alter your determination ? ”

Mary nodded, sharply enough, but it was doubtful if she could have spoken. Already her features had lost their rigidity, as though melted by my lady’s touching tones.

“You have known this person—that is to say, you have met him some dozen times—during a period of less than four months ; yet such is his influence over you, that you are prepared to sacrifice for him a friend of thirty years’ standing, a comfortable home, and a position in which you are respected by all who know you. If I was speaking to a young girl, Mary, I should not advance these arguments ; but you are a—a wise and sensible woman, and yet not of such a mature age that you need despair of finding a suitable partner for the rest of your life.”

Mistress Forest heaved a little sigh of relief, and her cheeks began to tone down to something like their natural crimson ; they *had* been purple with the apprehension of what my lady might have said upon the subject of age.

“Now, what is it,” pursued my lady, “which has produced this confidence in an almost entire stranger? Do you know anything of his former life, which may be a

guarantee to you for the stability of your future? Have you ever met a single individual who is acquainted with it in any way? For all you know, this man may have been a——”

“My lady!”

For a moment, the relative position of Mentor and pupil were exchanged; there was a quiet power about the waiting-maid's rebuke, for which an archbishop would have given more than his blessing, if he could only have incorporated it into a “charge.”

“You are right, Mary,” said my lady frankly; “let us only speak of what is within our own knowledge. Does this man's own conduct, then, give any promise of lasting happiness to the woman who may become his wife? Is he sober?”

“I believe he is fond of a glass, my lady, as most men are who have no home, or people to look after them. If he had a wife he would never go to the public-house at all, perhaps—he tells me so himself.”

My lady smiled faintly.

“Is he industrious and provident, Mary?”

“He has earned his money hardly enough, my lady, and it seems only natural that he should now spend a little in enjoying himself.”

“But not fling his money to left and right—I use your own words, dear Mary—and treat every chance-companion he comes across to liquor. Do you suppose that at his age he is likely to change habits of that sort?”

“I am not aware, my lady, that his age is anything against him,” replied the waiting-maid coldly. “He is not so likely to run through his money as if he were younger, and particularly when he has got some one to provide for beside himself. And indeed, so far as money goes, he has thousands of pounds; and if all goes well with him—and something has occurred to-day about which he has sent me a line by hand, dear fellow, by which it has been made almost certain that things *will*

go well—he will be a very rich man indeed after a week or two. There is some great race on Epsom Downs——”

“Oh Mary, how can you talk so cheerfully of money acquired in that way. If it is won to-day it is lost to-morrow; and even if it were not so, do you know that it is gained from those who can ill afford to lose it, and who, having lost it, often turn to wicked ways?”

“I don’t know about that, my lady, I’m sure,” responded the waiting-maid demurely; “I leave all these things to my betters. But, I suppose, if racing was a crime, Mr. Chifney would not be let to have the Abbey Farm—Sir Richard being so very particular—and Master Walter would not for ever be up at the stables. Why, he and Mr. Derrick are both together, hand and glove, in this very business—something about a French racer, it is; although, when you and I were at Dijon, my lady, we never heard of there being such a thing in all France, did we?—so my poor Ralph cannot be so very wicked after all. And please, Ma’am, it is no use saying anything more about it, for I have written him that letter already which he was to find in London, and put it in the post.”

“And did you answer ‘Yes,’ or ‘No,’ Mary?”

“I answered ‘Yes,’ my lady—that I would marry him—and begging your pardon, Madam, but I mean to stand to it.”





CHAPTER XVI.

CONFSSION.

THERE is one serious disadvantage—which mistresses should do well to remember—at which waiting-maids are always placed in disputations with their domestic superiors; they cannot (except they are prepared for instant dismissal) either quit the room and bang the door after them, or leave it open, and run down stairs “saying things” at the top of their voices. Both these modes of procedure, so natural to the female when “put out,” are denied to them, for the same reason that when on board ship they can’t take champagne for sea-sickness as their employers do; they cannot afford the indulgence.

Now, although Mary Forest was not debarred by mere pecuniary considerations from flinging herself out of her mistress’s room when she cried, “And I mean to stand to it,” there were other reasons which prevented her from suiting to her words that very appropriate and natural action. In all her blinding passion (and she was really very angry), she never quite lost sight of the respect she owed her mistress. Her devotion to her was such, that even while she listened to her most unpalatable arguments against the man she had accepted for her husband, her heart smote her with a sense of ingratitude towards the long-tried friend, who, after all, she knew, was anxious for her happiness rather than for her own

mere comfort ; and when she seemed most obstinate, she had often been nearest to throwing herself upon her mistress's neck, and exclaiming : " You are quite right, my lady; and I believe I have been an old fool all along." It was more with the desire of putting a stop to this most unpleasant dispute, than because her determination was absolutely adamantine and inflexible, that she once more reiterated : " Yes, my lady, I mean to stand to it," and fixed her eyes doggedly upon the floor, as though she would not even encounter another questioning glance.

" Mary," said her mistress solemnly, and after a long silence, " I am grieved beyond all power of words to tell at what you have just said ; but the mischief may not yet be quite past mending. I have seen this—Mr. Derrick —this very night, and therefore he will not receive your letter till, at earliest, to-morrow evening."

" No, nor then either, my lady, so far as that goes, for I was late for the London post ; I put the letter in the box for the very reason that I might not be persuaded to change my mind by—"

" Then it has not yet left the village post-office," interrupted my lady, hastily snatching up her bonnet from the table on which she had wearily put it down upon entering the room : " there is time to stop it yet."

" No, my lady ; I heard the postman's horn half an hour ago ; and if it were otherwise, nothing would induce me to alter what I have already written—nothing—nothing !" repeated Mistress Forest, emphasising her last two words by beating with her foot upon the carpet.

" Alas, dear friend, you know not what you say," replied my lady very gravely. " Give me your hand, Mary ; nay, do not withdraw it coldly, for you will have need of comfort and support, almost as much, alas, as I—*Mary, Mary, this man is married already!*" The waiting-maid started from her seat with a shrill scream.

" I don't believe it, I won't believe it ; it is false. How dare you tell a lie to me, Lady Lisgard, only to gain your ends ? "

"Hush, hush, Mary ; did you ever know me to tell a lie, my friend ? It is true as that yonder moon is rising, that this man has a wife alive. Do not weep so passionately."

"The perfidious villain ; the false, bad man ; the wicked, wicked wretch !" cried the waiting-maid, her eyes flashing through their tears.

"Nay, above all, do not blame *him*, Mary, for he knows it not himself ; he does not, indeed."

"What ? Not know whether he's married or not !" sobbed the unhappy bride-elect. "I don't believe *that*, at all events, even if I believe *you*. He has married so many, he doesn't know rightly who is his wife ; that is what you mean, I see. Sailors are all alike. Oh dear, dear, dear, when Mrs. Welsh comes to know of it. And the monster will have got my letter by to-morrow night, to show about. How nearly have I been committing bi—bi—bigamy ! "

"Calm yourself, dear Mary, calm yourself. Your trouble is nothing to what I suffer, and must continue to endure for my life long."

"Ah, my lady, I dare say it is very bad to be a widow ; but it's much worse to die an old—— leastways, at forty-fi—or forty-four, rather—to lose—— Oh dear ! what an honest man he looked, and such a beard and eyes. I will never trust to appearances again. I dare say, it is very wrong, my lady, but I fee—fee—feel as though I could tear Mrs. Derrick's eyes out ; I do, indeed." Here the bottle of smelling-salts, which upon a certain occasion we saw used by Mary Forest for the recovery of her mistress, had to change hands. The unfortunate waiting-maid was taken with a very genuine fit of hysterics, and not of the quiet sort either ; and if her senses left her, it could not certainly be said that she also lost the use of her limbs. At last, exhausted in body, but also more reasonable as to her mind, she whispered : "Mistress, dearest, tell me all you know." Then my lady knew that the time was come for her first self-humiliation. Throughout the narrative that followed, they were sitting upon the sofa

together hand in hand, but each had her face averted from the other, and only now and then by a convulsive grasp of the fingers, did Mary show her sympathy with her unhappy mistress. At first she was too full of her own trouble to interrupt by words, but soon the astounding revelations from my lady's lips overwhelmed every faculty of speech within her, and she sat like a child who listens to a horrid story in the darkening twilight.

"We have known one another more than half our lives, Mary," said I, "a while ago, and yet there has been a secret between us all that time. I have never kept anything else from you, but this was not mine alone to tell; it was Sir Robert's also. When he asked me to become his wife at Coveton, and you thought me so mad for first refusing him, and afterwards for demanding such a long delay, I had a reason for it, which he knew, but which you have never guessed. I was then the three-weeks' bride of another man.—You may well start, Mary, but that is the dreadful truth. The man, Ralph Gavestone, whom I mourned so deeply, as being drowned with my dear parents, and all the rest of the ship's company, in that great storm—which I would to Heaven had whelmed me in its waves—was not my half-brother, as Sir Robert persuaded me to give out, but my husband."

"You had no wedding-ring, my lady, when you came ashore," murmured the waiting-maid half incredulously.

"That is true, Mary. I know not how it was, but perhaps the cold and wet of that dreadful night made my fingers shrink—you remember how wan and thin I looked—and the ring must have dropped off; I never saw it after I reached land. But I was none the less a widow—as I thought; and although friendless, save for you, Mary—homeless and penniless, I thought I could never take another husband to my arms, although the raging sea had worked that rough divorce between us. At first, I replied: 'No, Sir Robert, never;' you will bear me witness that I did. Then, when he pressed me still, I bargained for three years. I thought that he

would tire of waiting for me, and get some fitter mate in the meantime ; I did, as Heaven is my judge. I was true to my poor Ralph—he had saved me upon that spar at the risk, and, as I then believed, at the sacrifice of his own life—as long as I—nay, I was true to him in a sense for ever. Sir Robert was well aware of that. I do not need justification from man or woman ; God himself absolved me, I think, so far. But that was an evil day, Mary, when I married. I was no more Sir Robert's wife than you were, Mary. Think of that. And he was not my husband. And our children, of whom he was so proud, are baseborn—bastards. Sir Richard—is it not terrible? do you not wonder that I live and am not mad?—he is not Sir Richard. And my dear, dear Walter, he is baseborn too. And Letty—for whom her eldest brother thinks nobody too high—she, too, is no Lisgard. If I had waited seven years instead of three, this would not have been so. There are law-books in the library which have told me so much ; but I have no adviser—none ; no friend—yes, you, Mary, I know—but not one who can help me. Is not this something worse than death itself which has fallen upon me?"

"And this man Derrick—he was Gavestone?" whispered Mary Forest in a hoarse grating voice.

"Yes ; did I not tell you so? I only found it out last Christmas Eve. I knew his voice, and I knew the carol that he sang. For one thing only do I thank Heaven—I who had reason, as I thought, to be thankful for so many things—that Sir Robert is not alive. His sleep in yonder churchyard is disturbed by no such ghastly dream. Ah, happy dead!"

"Mistress, beloved mistress," cried the waiting-maid, in an agony of remorse—"forgive me that I have been thinking of myself these many weeks, while you have been so burdened and tormented. Henceforth, I am yours only. As I hope to get to heaven when I die, I will be true to you whatever happens. Let us think what that may be."

"Nay, let us *not* think," exclaimed her mistress with a shudder, "or I shall lose my wits. Would you have me picture what this house would be should *he* come hither and claim me for his wife? Richard and he beneath the self-same roof, and he the master! Would Walter—though he herds with him, you say—brook this man as his equal? Would he not loathe him rather, and how soon, ah me! unlearn the love he owes to me—his wretched mother! I cannot bear to think of it, I tell you. Let us act; let us be doing something—something! How my brain whirls! Think for me, Mary—pray for me, for Heaven is deaf, alas, to my poor prayers!"

But even while she spoke, the gracious tears began to fill the furrows in her cheeks, which until now had been dry throughout her talk; and having told her friend, the weight about her heart was lifted off a little, and the tightness round her brow was loosened by the blessed hand of sympathy.

"I must write to him at once," said Mary thoughtfully. "How fortunate that he did not leave Mirk until to-night. The two letters will now reach him at the same time. He cannot write in answer to the one which—which I wrote first—without having read the other; that will be something saved."

My lady shook her head.

"There is but little hope in that, I fear; for he himself has this night told me—yes, I saw him face to face, Mary, only I was thickly veiled, thank Heaven—he told me frankly (thinking I did not wish to lose my waiting-maid) that he should lay it to my charge if your reply was 'No,' and should not take it as the answer of your heart. How much more, if he gets a refusal coming so quickly upon the very heels of this acceptance, will he decline to believe it comes from your own self. More likely, it would cause him, reckless as he is, to do something rash and vengeful—perhaps to return hither on the instant, and— Oh Mary, Mary, I would give five

thousand pounds this day, if that would stop his coming to Mirk again!"

"Would that *not* stop him, mistress?" asked the waiting-maid with earnest gravity. "Five thousand pounds is a fortune, is it not?"

"It would not stop *him*, Mary," rejoined my lady sadly. "Ralph Gavestone, even in his youth-time, never valued money a fillip when weighed against a whim; and now his will is more a law to him than ever. I have never known resolve so fixed as I read it in his eyes this night. And if he guessed the truth, Mary—oh, if he did but dream that I, his lawful wife, for whom he had gladly laid his own life down, whose memory he has kept fresh and green when all else has withered, whose loss has been his ruin, was playing him false!—he said himself, that on his reckless soul 'twas like as not there might be murder some day—and, Mary, I do believe him."

White as the very moonbeams was my lady's face, and the hand trembled which held the handkerchief she passed across her damp white brow.

"Not for myself, good Mary, is this fear," gasped she, "but for my dear ones—do you hear them yonder? is it not sad to listen to such mirth?—for this unhappy man being wronged, becomes a madman straightway. Not disgrace alone may fall upon us here, not only shame—think of that, Mary; not *only* shame upon Sir Richard and the rest; but even crime may visit us. This house of dead Sir Robert—once the home of peace, and genial ease, and hospitality—— But that shall never be; no, they shall never meet, my sons and he; I will die rather, and my corpse would part them wide enough."

"Oh, mistress, talk not so; you freeze my very blood. What was it we were saying before you began to look like this?"

"You talked of bribing this Ralph Gavestone—for how could I offer him gold save *as* a bribe? But if a bribe, what need was there to bribe him? Why should

I wish him once more upon the other side of the world? Why pay him a younger brother's portion, to quit the courtship of my waiting-maid? No, Mary, this man is no mere rogue, that he should take his money without question, and be off; he is suspicious, keen—and ah, if wronged, as implacable as death itself."

"One moment, my lady!" cried Mistress Forest leaping to her feet. "I do believe I have a plan to get that letter back."

"Ah, good Heaven! What is it, wise, kind heart?"

"See, Madam," and she began to reckon on her plump fingers, with her pleasant face aglow with mingled joy and astonishment at her own sagacity: "the note was put in late for the London post from Dalwynch; it will therefore remain there, though it has left Mirk, all to-night, and not be forwarded till the morning mail. If we drive over to-morrow early—starting, say, at six o'clock—we shall be in plenty of time to stop its going further. In the meantime, I will write another letter in its place."

"You have saved me—for this time—I do believe, dear Mary; yes, we can drive to Dalwynch—I will give orders for the carriage to be ready at six—and still be back at the Abbey by breakfast-time. If we are pressed for the reason, we can give the true one—to a certain point, if needs must be—you had a mind to alter what you have written to your suitor."





CHAPTER XVII.

CONTRARY TO THE REGULATIONS OF HER MAJESTY'S
POST-OFFICE.

SORELY did the fat coachman, who had no neck, inveigh against that caprice of his mistress which compelled his appearance at the front door upon the ensuing morning at an hour so altogether unexampled. If he had but heard that it was all upon the account of Mistress Forest, and the outlandish fellow who wore little gold rings in his ears, and that curly beard, so like the door-mat of the servants' hall, it is doubtful whether he would have obeyed such a premature behest at all; but as it was, he was sitting on the coach-box with the sleek nags before him, at the foot of the great steps which led down from the entrance-hall, at six o'clock to a minute. It was broad daylight of course, so bright that it made him wink again, as it flashed upon the glittering harness and the shining skins of the pampered beasts; but still it was not a time for a man of his years and girth to be hurried up and made to toil. "As late as you please at night, my lady, and nobody ever heard Joe Wiggins utter a murmur," muttered he; "but there's no constitushun as can stand such wear and tear as *this*."

However that might be with Mr. Wiggins, Miss Rose Aynton seemed to make uncommonly light of early rising, for much to the astonishment of her hostess, she

was up and dressed and in the breakfast-room when that lady made her appearance at half-past five.

"I happened to hear that you were going out betimes, dear Lady Lisgard," said she with her sweetest smile; "and getting up in these first summer mornings is *such* a treat to a poor London-bred girl like me; so, without saying a word to dearest Letty, I thought I would just fill her place for once, and make your coffee for you."

"Thank you, Rose," returned my lady a little stiffly, for she had not intended that anybody, and far less one who was not a member of her own family, should have been a witness to her departure. "I have unpleasant business on hand which takes me to Dalwynch before the morning train starts."

"If you are going to London," began Rose hesitatingly, as if intending to send something by my lady's hands to her aunt, "if it was not too much trouble——"

"I am not going to London," replied Lady Lisgard quietly. "I shall be back by the usual breakfast-hour, I have no doubt."

Here my lady sipped her coffee with the air of a connoisseur, and perceiving Miss Aynton was about to ask more questions, requested a little sugar; then a fresh supply of—no, not hot milk—some cream. Would the carriage never come round, and release her from this importunate girl.

"How glad the people will be to see you about again once more, Lady Lisgard," observed Miss Aynton cheerfully. "You can't imagine how curious they have been to know why you have shut yourself up so long."

"I was not aware that my movements were any business of theirs, Rose," returned my lady with severity, "nor, indeed, of anybody's except myself."

"Very true," answered Miss Aynton carelessly; "that is what I always told them. Besides, it is not pleasant to run the chance of meeting a rude and perhaps half-drunk ruffian like this man Derrick, when one knows

he has made up his mind to address one upon the first opportunity."

"Indeed!" said my lady scornfully, "I assure you I was quite unaware of that dreadful menace." She stole a glance over her cup, to see if there was anything to read in this strange girl's face; but there was nothing. As soon as she had finished her duties in connection with the coffee-pot, she had taken a piece of fancy-work in her hands, in the execution of which she seemed entirely wrapped up.

"Oh yes; of course it is most ridiculous, but that is what all the village has been saying for these five months, more or less; and now that you are going out for the first time, when he has but left the place overnight, they are sure to say——"

"How do you know, Rose, that this man left Mirk last night?" inquired my lady, setting down her cup, and looking at the young girl fixedly. Could it possibly have been *she* whom she had beheld lurking about the churchyard wall, and perhaps listening to the conversation, in the course of which Derrick had announced his intention of going at that late hour to Dalwynch, so as to be in time for the first up-train upon the morrow?

A faint flush stole over Miss Anyton's face, but by no means such a blush as is called "tell-tale:" it might easily enough have been caused by the mere directness of the question. "Your son, Mr. Walter, told me," replied she simply—"he is a great ally of this man's, you know.—Here is the carriage. I am afraid you will find it very dull, Lady Lisdard, taking this long drive all alone. If I thought that my company——"

"Thank you, Rose," replied my lady hastily; "it is most kind of you to offer it; but the fact is, I am going to take Forest with me. This visit to Dalwynch is mainly upon her account, indeed. If the chariot held more than two, perhaps I should take you at your word; but as it is—— See, I have a book for my companion.—Come, Forest; we have no time to lose."

Mary had entered the room while she was speaking, and gave quite a start at seeing Miss Anyton at the breakfast-table. Her mistress was already cloaked, and had her bonnet on.

"To Dalwynch, my lady?" said the footman, having put up the steps and closed the chariot-door.

"Yes; drive fast."

"Which part of the town, my lady?" for there were two roads to the post-town, the relative length of which from the Abbey depended upon what part of the place was to be visited.

Miss Aynton was standing on the last flight of the stone steps, and could hear every word that was spoken.

"Take the lower road," replied my lady very distinctly; and the well-hung chariot—pleasantest invention save the fair-weather Hansom, which the wit of coach-makers has yet sought out—rolled swiftly along the gravelled road.

"Then they are not going to the railway station," exclaimed Rose aloud.

"No, Miss," assented the butler, as he stood at the open hall-door, regarding nature as though it were a novelty to him at that hour. "I should say it must be the post-office. Perhaps my lady wishes to get the letters this morning earlier than the Mirk's man can bring them."

"Very likely, Roberts," returned the young lady, a little disconcerted at her involuntary remark having been overheard. "Let us hope she will have good news. But I should scarcely have thought it was necessary to have gone herself."

"Well, I am not so sure, Miss. Mrs. Rudd, the post-mistress at Dalwynch, is a great stickler for forms and that, and she might have made some difficulty, particularly as she did not obtain her place through our influence."

"*Whose* influence, Roberts?"

"Ours, Miss, to be sure. The Ligard interest, you

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"*Whose* influence, Roberts?"

"Ours, Miss, to be sure. The Lissard interest, you

see, was given last election to the losing side. Although time was, I can well recollect, when poor Sir Robert had everything of that sort at his disposal that was vacant in these parts ; but them yallers, they have gone and spoilt it all this time.” And with a sigh of regret for the golden age of patronage, and a shake of the head directed against the levelling opinions at present in the ascendant, Mr. Roberts went off to his breakfast.

No sooner had the wheels of the chariot began to move, than Lady Lisgard observed to her companion : “ You have the letter with you that I dictated last night, have you not ? ”

“ Yes, my lady ; here it is, though not sealed down, in case you might have thought of anything to add.”

“ No, Mary,” said her mistress, perusing it ; “ there is nothing here that I can better by thought, although I spent all night in thinking over it. A refusal could scarce be made shorter or more decided than this ; there is not a trace of vacillation to give the most sanguine suitor hope.” Then, as if some other idea was expressing itself almost in spite of herself, she added : “ Do I not look deadly pale, Mary ? ”

“ Very white and worn, Madam, as you well may.”

“ But bad enough for people to observe who did not know the cause ? ”

“ For some people, Madam. *She* saw it sharp enough, if you mean *her*, my lady,” and the waiting-maid made a significant gesture, in the direction of Miss Rose Aynton. “ Nothing escapes *her*, bless you—nothing ; and the sooner she’s out of the house, under present circumstances—and indeed under every circumstance, in my opinion—the better.”

“ You never liked her from the first, Mary,” said her mistress in the tone of one who argues against her own conviction. “ We should not be uncharitable in our judgments of others, and particularly as respects young folks ; we often set down as serious faults what in ~~them~~ is *only* thoughtlessness.”

"Miss Aynton is none of that sort, my lady ; she always thinks before she speaks, and takes a good long look before she leaps ; and for all she seems as though butter would not melt in her mouth, she's as full o' schemes as a cat at a dairy-door. If there's cream to be got in this world, she'll get it, my lady, I'll go bail, let the butter-milk fall to whose share it will."

"I confess that I can't quite understand her," said my lady musing. "I am sure, when she first came, she seemed simple and unobtrusive enough ; while, on the other hand, in her manner towards me of late——"

"Downright impudence, I call it, my lady, in such a chit as she."

"Well, I don't say that ; but she is certainly not so respectful as she might be. I shall be sorry to send her back to London just as the summer is beginning, to live with her cross old aunt, whom she appears to dislike so ; but I confess I think she has been here long enough."

"Much too long, my lady, much too long," answered Mary Forest gravely ; "she has set more people in the house by the ears than you wot of. While Anne Rees, who used to be Miss Letty's maid, one would think Miss Aynton was her mistress now, so entirely has she got her under her thumb. She has ferreted out some folly of Anne's—Heaven knows how she did it, or what it is ; but the girl's her slave. From whom but her did she learn that you were starting at this hour ? And, again, why was not Miss Letty told as well as Miss Rose ? Do you suppose she would have let anybody else make coffee for her mamma, if she had been aware of your departure ? No, no. Then Miss Aynton will take credit to herself for not permitting Miss Letty to be called, and fatigue herself by getting up so early. Nasty, sly young hussy ! That's just her way ; uncommon civil, kind, and attentive, until she gets the upper hand, and finds you under her thumb ; then you begin to know her. We've found her out in the servants'-hall, although she makes a fool of old Roberts yet. She actually told him,

that at the last dinner-party at the Abbey she thought him the most distinguished-looking person in the room ; but only wait till she catches him some afternoon at the Madeira ! then he'll be her obedient, humble servant, without having any more pretty speeches. That's a bad, bold girl, Ma'am, let her be ten times a lady born."

Here Mistress Forest, indignantly tossing her head back, without making due allowance for her bonnet, came into sharp contact with the back of the chariot, and severely bit her tongue. My lady was thereby enabled to interpose a remark.

"But why have you not told me a word of this before, Mary ? I would never have permitted a guest of mine, and particularly a young lady to whom I stand in the relation of guardian while she is under my roof, first to ingratiate herself with my servants, and then to tyrannise over them in the way you describe. I never heard of anything more atrociously mean, and I think you have been wanting in your duty—let alone your personal regard for me, Mary—to have concealed the matter so long."

"Begging your pardon, my lady, you have nobody to blame but yourself for that," observed the waiting-maid with asperity. "The only harsh words you ever spoke to me were about certain of Mrs. Welsh's doings, of which I complained with reason, though I do not wish to refer to them now. What you said was this : 'Never abuse the affectionate relation in which we two stand, Mary, by causing me to side with you against your fellow-servants. I can deny you nothing, but do not vex me with tale-bearing. I hate all vulgar gossip, and despise those who bring it.' After a setting-down like that, it was not likely that I should give tongue about Miss Aynton's ways, nor let you know how she has made Anne Rees a spy upon us all. No, no ; mind your own business, Mary Forest, says you ; and I've minded it, my lady, ever since."

"Do not be angry with me, friend," returned Lady

Lisgard sadly ; " I dare say I was wrong ; and even if not, I have no heart to argue with you now."

" And no wonder, poor dear," assented the waiting-maid, greatly mollified. " I was a brute to bring it up against you just now in all this trouble ; nor was it the right time, perhaps, to speak about Miss Aynton's goings on. Only you yourself said her manner was not quite what it used to be, and I was so afraid that she might be getting *you*, my lady, under her thumb."

" How could that possibly be, Mary ? She cannot have the slightest suspicion of ——"

" She sniffs something, my lady, or she would not have been making your coffee this morning. However, let her sniff, only be you very careful to lock your desk ; and when you want to say anything to me about you know who, come out of earshot of the keyhole of your own door.—Ah, wouldn't she, though ? But I know better. A thief ? No, I didn't say a thief, although, for the matter of that, she has a mind to steal from you, or I am much mistaken, something you value most on earth —your son. There now, I've said it."

And the waiting-maid drew a very long breath, as though some oppressive weight was off her mind at last. She evidently expected her mistress to express astonishment, if not horror ; and it was positively a disappointment to her when my lady replied calmly : " I know all about that, Mary ; but you are doing Miss Aynton wrong. She might have been my daughter-in-law if she liked, and yet, to my certain knowledge, she refused to be so."

" She refused ? "

" Most certainly she did. My son made her an offer in my presence, and she rejected him.—But here we are at Dalwynch. Tell Wiggins to stop at the post-office. Thank Heaven, there is plenty of time to spare. How my heart does beat ! "

The waiting-maid pulled the check-string, and delivered her mistress's orders, but quite mechanically,

without knowing what she said. In spite of the importance of what she had now so immediately to do, her mind was entirely occupied with the wonder of what she had just heard, and she kept repeating to herself: "And she rejected him? and she rejected him?" while her heightened eyebrows almost amalgamated with her hair. Perhaps some of this excessive astonishment was due to poor Mistress Forest's peculiar position; she thought it so strange that one of her own sex should reject any man—who was not already married to somebody else.

"Here is the post-office, Mary. Mind you speak very civilly to the woman, and make haste; I shall be in a perfect fever till I see you come back with that dreadful letter safe in your hand."

One minute, two minutes, three minutes—each seeming an hour to my lady, shrinking in a corner of the chariot, while the omnibus to the station passed and re-passed, picking up she knew not what passengers, and bearing Derrick himself, for all she knew, within it. At last Lady Lisgard could endure the suspense no longer. "John," said she to the footman standing beside the door, "what is Forest about? Why does she not return?"

"She is talking to Mrs. Rudd, my lady. I think there is some dispute about a letter; for they are both in the post-office department."

"Let me out, John," exclaimed my lady impatiently; and the next instant she had entered Mrs. Rudd's establishment. This was, for the most part, a grocer's shop; one-fifth of it only being reserved for the reception and despatch of Her Majesty's mails. There were no customers at that still early hour; a young man who was sanding the floor with some ostentation, as though to imply that *all* the sand went that way, and none into the sugar, made a respectable pause as my lady's silk swept by; and another, who appeared to be washing his hands in tea, assumed that sickly smile which is supposed by persons of his class to conciliate people of quality; but

Mrs. Rudd herself, intrenched behind her little post-office palisade, gave no sign of gracious welcome, and from out the pigeon-hole through which she distributed her stamps, her words poured forth in an undiminished stream of denial and severity ; nay, I doubt whether the presence of my lady did not intensify the bitterness of its tone.

“Whatever importance it may be to you to get this letter, Mistress Forest,” cried she, addressing poor Mary, who was looking very disconsolate, and not a little angry also, “it is of much greater moment to me that I should keep it. It is as much as my place is worth to give a letter back which has once been given into my charge ; and I am not aware that I owe that place to my Lady Lisgard, and therefore feel called upon to risk—— I beg pardon, your ladyship—but I did not catch sight of you before. What your servant has come to ask of me is something out of the question. I will post this second letter for her—although it is two minutes past the time, even with an extra stamp, for *that*—but as for returning her this other: yes, I have no doubt it’s hers—although, for that matter, people’s handwriting is often very like other people’s—but directly it reached this box it became the property of the Postmaster-general. It is no more hers now than it is mine ; and if I was to yield it up, it’s a matter, Madam, that might be brought before the assizes.”

“Mrs. Rudd,” said my lady quietly. “I hope, although your late husband and my son were not quite of the same way of thinking as to politics, that you do not look upon me in an unneighbourly light. I do not wish to insult you by offering you a bribe ; but I may say this much, that nobody ever put me under an obligation yet, without my endeavouring to recompense them to the best of my power.”

“Yes, my lady—although I can’t say as *I* have ever been overburdened with favours at your ladyship’s hands—I know what sugar and currants goes to the Abbey from Simmons’s every week—enough for a regiment, I’m

sure, and at such a price, too, and all because he voted blue——”

“Voting blue, Mrs. Rudd,” interrupted my lady, “is nothing at all compared with the good service you would do me, if you could only oblige my maid in the matter of this letter. Her future happiness, I may say, is bound up in the mere fact of that little note arriving or not at its destination.”

“*Mr. R. Derrick, Turf Hotel, Piccadilly,*” muttered Mrs. Rudd, looking at the address over the top of her silver spectacles. “I should like to have half the Abbey grocery custom very much, of course.”

“You shall have it,” whispered my lady in broken tones.

“But I dare not do it,” continued the post-mistress. “This might be held over me—if it ever came to be known—so that I should never be my own mistress again, which, now that Rudd is gone, I mean to be. When you have once done an illegal action, my lady, you may just as well be a slave—until you have taken your punishment. Somebody is sure to get wind of it, and to put you under their thumb.”

My lady gave a ghastly smile, for speech was not in her.

“Look here, Mrs. Rudd,” interposed Mistress Forest softly, “you are not asked either to destroy or to give up this letter—of the inside of which, if you please, I will tell you every word. It is written to my lover—that’s the fact; and I am very, very anxious that he should receive it”—here she trod upon my lady’s foot with unmistakable emphasis—“should receive it by this night’s post.”

“Well, so he will,” returned the post-mistress, “in Piccadilly.”

“Yes, but Mr. Derrick is *not* in Piccadilly,” urged the waiting-maid. “The direction should be ‘*Care of Mr. Arthur Haldane*’—what court is it, my lady?—Yes; *Pump Court, Temple*. If you would only let me write

that, Mrs. Rudd, upon the envelope, instead of the present address, all mischief will be avoided. Would it not, my lady?"

"There seems no great harm in that," said Mrs. Rudd reflectively.

"No harm whatever, and a great deal of good to you," murmured the waiting-maid, as with a rapid hand she crossed out the words already written, and substituted for them the address of Mr. Haldane's law-chambers. "Thank you kindly. Now, please to stamp this other. I am so much obliged."

"And I too," said my lady graciously. "Be so kind, Mrs. Rudd, as to let me take your list of groceries with me. What nice macaroni that looks—I find such a difficulty in getting it in the country pure."

Mrs. Rudd herself accompanied my lady to her chariot, and courtesied to the ground as the chariot whirled away.

No sooner were they alone, than mistress and maid exchanged a hearty kiss. "Thank you, thank you, dear Mary," cried the former; "without your presence of mind, what should we have done! I began to feel quite prostrate with despair, and even now I tremble to think how nearly we had failed. I could not go through such a scene again, I believe, even if my life depended upon it."

"Ah, yes, you could, my lady; and I only trust it may not be necessary for you to do so. There is nothing more, however, to be done at present, save to wait and hope—except the telegraph message. I ventured to tell John, 'To the railway station.'"

"Telegraph to whom, and about what, Mary?"

"We must let Mr. Arthur know what he is to do with that letter, my lady; otherwise, he may endeavour to forward it to the person to whom it is addressed."

"Very true, dear Mary. I do believe that my wits are leaving me. By all means telegraph 'Burn it.' I wish I could repay you for your prudent thought, as

easily as I can recompense Mrs. Rudd for her complaisance."

"Do not think of repaying me, my dear," replied the waiting-maid fondly. "It is a heartfelt pleasure to find that I am not altogether useless in this strait. I am yours—yours—yours—my beloved mistress, and will be though every friend on earth should stand afar off, and you were forsaken by your very kith and kin."

"But God forbid that should ever be the case, Mary!" ejaculated Lady Lisgard solemnly.

"*Amen*, my lady—amen, I'm sure ; but when the worst happens that can happen, you will please to remember you have Mary Forest still !"





CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNCHEERFUL PICNIC.

BY the time Lady Lisgard returned to the Abbey, notwithstanding that the sleek bays had devoured the road with all the haste of which their condition permitted, it was long past the breakfast-hour, and her absence from that meal provoked no little comment from the members of her family. Nobody was able to allay their curiosity as to what could have taken mamma to Dalwynch, but Miss Aynton did her best to stimulate it.

"She has gone upon Mary Forest's account," said she — "that is all I can tell you. I never knew anyone take such trouble about her maids as dear Lady Lisgard."

"Yes, Rose," replied Letty warmly ; "but it is not every maid who has lived with her mistress thirty years. I believe Mary would lay down her very life for dear mamma, and indeed for any of us. Whenever I read those stupid letters in the papers about there being no good old servants to be seen nowadays, I long to send the editor a list of our people at the Abbey. Mary, indeed, is quite a new acquisition in comparison with Wiggins and the gardener ; but then she is almost faultless. I have heard mamma say that there has never been a word between them."

"Not between them, indeed, Letty," returned Miss

Aynton laughing; “for Mistress Forest has all the talk to herself.”

Sir Richard smiled grimly, for Mary had been in his bad books ever since her attachment to “that vagabond Derrick.”

“Good, Miss Rose!” cried Walter—“very good. I wish I could say as much for this so-called new-laid egg. Why should eggs be of different degrees of freshness? Why not all fresh? Why are they ever permitted to accumulate?”

“My egg is very good,” observed Sir Richard sententiously; “how is yours, Miss Aynton?” and he laid an emphasis upon the name, in tacit reproof to his brother for having been so familiar as to say “Miss Rose.”

“Well, Sir Richard, I am London-bred, you know, and therefore your country eggs, by comparison, are excellent.”

“I wish I could think,” said the baronet with stateliness, “that in other matters we equally gained by contrast with town, in your opinion.”

“I believe London is the place to get everything good,” remarked Walter sharply.

“We are going to-day, Miss Aynton,” continued the baronet, without noticing the interruption, “to offer you something which really cannot be got in town, and which hitherto the state of the weather has forbidden even here—”

“Ah, for shame, Richard!” interrupted Letty, holding up her hands. “Now, that was to be a surprise for Rose.—It’s a picnic, my dear. I dare say you scarcely know what that is.”

“I can tell you, then,” ejaculated Walter with acidity: “it’s packing up all the things you would have in the ordinary course at luncheon in a comfortable manner—except the bread, or something equally necessary, which is always left behind—and carrying them about six miles to the top of an unprotected hill—in this particular

case, to a tower without a roof to it—there to be eaten without tables or chairs, and in positions the most likely to produce indigestion that the human body can adapt itself to."

"I have always been told that being in a bad humour is the most certain thing to cause what you eat to disagree with you," observed Letty demurely.—"Never mind what Walter says. I am sure you will be delighted, dear Rose; we are going to Belcomb, a sort of shooting-box belonging to us, about five miles away, and built by grandpapa."

"Commonly termed 'Lisgard's folly,'" added Master Walter.

"Not by his descendants, however, I should hope, with one exception," observed Sir Richard, haughtily.—"I will thank you, Walter, not to cut my newspaper."

Master Walter had seized the paper-knife as though it had been a more deadly weapon, and was engaged in disembowelling one of a multiplicity of newspapers which had just arrived by post.

"I did not see it was yours," returned he. "Goodness knows, nobody wants to read the *Court Journal* but yourself. The idea of not liking one's newspapers cut!"

"Yes, I must say, my dear Richard," said Letty, playfully patting her elder brother, next to whom she sat, upon the shoulder, "that is a most singular objection of yours. I think it certainly proves that you will always remain an old bachelor."

Sir Richard maintained a frowning silence. Master Walter twirled his silken moustache, and looked up at Miss Aynton with a meaning smile.

"What is your opinion upon the subject," said he, "Miss Rose?"

"Insolent!" exclaimed Sir Richard, rising so hastily that he knocked over the chair on which he had been sitting. "How dare you ask such questions in my presence?"

"Richard, Richard!" cried a reproving voice; and lo! at the open door stood my lady, hollow-eyed and pale, and with such a weariness and melancholy in her tones as would have touched most hearts. "Am I ever to find you and Walter quarrelling thus? Yes, I have heard all, and think you both to blame; but nothing can excuse this violence. If I have any authority in this house at all, not another word, I beg."

Sir Richard bit his lip, but resumed his seat; Walter went on quietly dissecting the *Illustrated London News*, with an air of intense interest; Miss Aynton very accurately traced the pattern of her plate with her fork; Letty, the innocent cause of the outbreak, shed silent tears. Altogether, the family picture was gloomy, and the situation embarrassing. My lady reaped this advantage, however, that nobody asked her a word about her expedition to Dalwynch.

"Do not let me detain you at table, my dear Letty," said she, breaking a solemn pause. "Miss Aynton was so good as to make my coffee this morning, and therefore it is only fair that she should perform the same kind office now."

Glad enough of this excuse to leave the room—a movement felt by all to be very difficult of imitation—Letty rushed up stairs to indulge in a good cry in her own bed-room, "the upper system of fountains" only having been yet in play. Sir Richard gloomily stalked away towards the stables; Walter lounged into the hall, lit a cigar, and paced to and fro upon the terrace beneath the windows of the breakfast-room, with both his hands in his pockets. Whiffs of his Havana, and scraps of the opera tune which he was humming, came in at the open window, to those who yet remained. My lady had much too good taste to dislike the smell of good tobacco, and the air which he had chosen was a favourite one with her; perhaps Master Walter hummed it upon that account. He was to leave the Abbey next day to join his regiment—although not immediately.

It was only natural he should wish to spend a few days in London after he had had so much of the quiet of Mirk, and yet my lady grudged them.

How pleasant everything about him was ; how dull the Abbey would be without him ; what a sad pity it was that he and Sir Richard got on so ill. If she were to die, would they not turn their backs on one another for ever, and be brothers no more ? and if something worse than death were to happen to her—— No, she would not think of that. Had not all that could be done to avert such utter ruin been done that very morning ? There was surely no immediate peril now—no necessity for such excessive caution and self-restraint as she had been obliged of late months to exercise ; it was something to have breathing-space and liberty.

“I hope you are coming with us to the picnic, Lady Lisgard, now that that horrid man has gone ?” said a cold quiet voice.

My lady, looking out of the window at her favourite son, and lost in gloomy depths of thought, had entirely forgotten that she had invited Miss Rose Aynton to bear her company.

She did not venture to look upon her questioner’s face, though she felt that it was fixed on hers, reading Heaven knew what.

How had she dared to think of liberty with this domestic spy under her very roof ! What should she answer to this dreadful question ? Something this girl must know, or must suspect, or she would never have ventured thus to allude a second time to the man Derrick, after her rebuff in the morning. Above all things, she would follow Mistress Forest’s advice, and get Miss Aynton out of Mirk Abbey. She had intended to speak to her respecting what had just occurred at the breakfast-table ; that would also offer an opportunity to say something more.

“Yes, Rose, I am going with you to Belcomb. It is a very favourite spot of mine—very. It was about that ex-

pedition, partly, that I wished to speak with you. I was about to ask you to be very careful in your conduct towards my sons this day. It is the last time they will be together for weeks, perhaps. Be kind to my poor Richard. Of course, Walter knew nothing of what has passed between you and his brother ; but the bow which he drew at a venture sent home a barbed shot."

Miss Aynton bowed her head.

" You were sorry for that, Rose, I know. You cannot fail to see how irritable he has lately grown, poor fellow. The fact is, he has overestimated the strength of his own powers of self-restraint. Your presence is a perpetual trial to him."

My lady paused, anticipating some reply to a hint so palpable ; but Miss Aynton, who carried her fancy-work in her pocket, continued to develop a pansy in floss silk ; and the flower opened in silence.

" Under these circumstances, dear Rose," pursued my lady, " do you not think it would be better—I know how embarrassing it would be to you to propose it, and therefore, although your hostess, I relieve you of the task—do you not think it would, on the whole, be wiser for you to leave us a little sooner than you had intended ?"

The humming of the opera tune, and the odour of the Havana, were growing more distinct, and the elastic footfall on the gravel was coming very near.

" If I consulted my own feelings," returned Miss Aynton, in firm, clear tones, " I should certainly have left Mirk before this, Lady Lisgard."

" Hush, Miss Aynton, for Heaven's sake !" cried my lady, " the window is open."

" But unless Sir Richard himself," pursued the girl in more subdued accents, " releases me from my promise to remain until after his birthday, I must, with your permission, Madam, do so ; otherwise, he might possibly imagine that *his* presence is too great a trial for *me*, and I should be loath indeed to have my departure so misconstrued."

There was bitterness in the tone with which she spoke, but determination too.

"I am to understand, then," returned my lady, flushing, "that contrary to my advice and wish——"

"Mother, dear, here comes the break," cried Master Walter, from the terrace beneath, in his ringing cheerful tones. "I hope you have told Roberts about the prog."

"Yes, dear, yes," answered my lady, lovingly even in her haste; then turning to the young girl, she whispered almost fiercely: "At least, Miss Aynton, you will shape your behaviour this afternoon as I requested. There is no time now to discuss the other matter. And indeed the butler entered the next moment with: "The break is at the door, my lady."

Now, the break was a very roomy vehicle, with accommodation within it for three times the party who were now about to occupy it, besides two seats at the back, like flying buttresses, for footmen. Yet Sir Richard chose to sit upon the box beside the driver, a place only selected (unless for smoking purposes) by persons with "horsey" characteristics, who prefer coachman's talk to that of their equals, and among whom the baronet could not be justly classed; but the fact was, the young man was in an evil temper, and desired no companionship but his own. He would have seen the whole expedition at the bottom of the sea—a metaphor open to the gravest objections, but which he used while arguing the matter with himself aloud—if it were not that that fellow Walter was going—and—and—he was not going to let *him* have all the talk to himself, that was all. True, Sir Richard had given up the idea of transforming Miss Aynton into Lady Lisgard; but still it was not pleasant to see another man making himself exclusively agreeable to her. He was annoyed with himself at having exhibited such passion at the breakfast-table, for the more he thought of it, the more he felt convinced that Walter's remark, although doubtless intended to be offensive, had not been

made with any knowledge of his own rejected suit. Still, he was in a very bad temper, and listened to the conversation going on behind his back with a moody brow, and every now and then a parting of the lips, through which escaped something the reverse of a prayer.

It was Walter, of course, who was talking.

"Inhabited!" said he, in answer to some question of Miss Aynton's. "Oh dear, no. Belcomb never had a tenant but once, and I should think would never have another. One Sir Heron Grant and his brother took it two years for the shooting-season: a brace of Scotchmen whose ancestors dated from the Deluge, but so dreary a couple, that one wished that the family had started from a still earlier epoch, and been all washed away."

"I thought Richard rather liked Sir Heron," observed Letty simply.

"Yes, because he was a baronet; and birds of the same gorgeous plumage flock together, you know. There was nothing remarkable about him but his feathers, and he scarcely ever opened his mouth except to put food in it. It is said that in the old stage-coach times, he and his brother travelled from Edinburgh to London, and only uttered one sentence apiece. At York, the younger brother saw a rat come out of a wheat-rick. 'By Jove,' cried he, 'there's a rat!' The next morning, and after an interval of about eighty miles, Sir Heron replied: 'Ay, if Towser had seen that rat, he would have made short work of him.'"

"Well, it appears they agreed, at all events," returned Rose, coldly. "After all even a foolish remark is better than an ill-natured one."

"The scenery is getting well worth your attention here," observed Sir Richard, turning graciously round towards Miss Aynton. "Belcomb is a complete solitude, but for those who are contented with the pleasures of the country, it is a pleasant spot enough."

"Can we see the house from here, Sir Richard?"

"No, not until we reach this windmill, on the top of

the hill. The private road branches out from the highway at that spot ; and the mill is the nearest inhabited house to Belcomb.—By-the-bye, mother, Hathaway must be spoken to about those sails of his—there, you saw how even old Jenny started at them—it is positively dangerous for horses to pass by. He must build up that old wall a foot higher, and put a gate up. Any stray cattle might wander in and get knocked down—the sails are so close to the ground.”

Master Walter had not at all relished Miss Aynton’s rejoinder to his story ; still less had he liked his brother’s striking into the conversation ; least of all did he approve of this landlord talk about repairs and alterations, which reminded him of his being a younger son, and having neither part nor lot in the great Lisgard heritage.

“There’s the Folly,” cried he, suddenly, with a view of changing the subject ; “upon that cliff-like hill yonder, above that belt of trees.”

“What, that beautiful ivied tower !” exclaimed Rose.

“Yes ; without a roof to it.”

“Well, at all events, it’s very pretty,” said Miss Aynton reprovingly. “I am sure, Mr. Walter, you ought to be grateful to your grandpapa for building so picturesque an edifice.”

“He might have made a road, however, to it,” observed Walter satirically ; “a road and a roof, I do consider to be indispensable.”

“There’s a beautiful winding path through the wood, Rose,” said Letty, “fifty times better than any road ; and is not the piece of water charming ? It is the only one with any pretension to be called a lake in all the county.”

Certainly Belcomb deserved praise. A small but comfortably furnished house, embosomed in trees, through which were the pleasantest peeps of hill and dale, and spread before it quite a crystal tarn, with rocky islands so picturesquely grouped that they almost gave the notion of being artificial. It was as though a segment of the Lake-

country had been cut off, and inserted into the very midst of Wheatshire.

It was as lonely, too, to all appearance, as any Cumberland mere. An old man and his wife, who were in charge of the place, came hirpling out with respectful welcomes, and the latter was about to remove the shutters of the drawing-room, when my lady interposed.

"No, Rachel ; we will not trouble you to do that. We are going to picnic at the Tower. You seem quite surprised to see us so early. I suppose nobody has been here yet upon the same errand."

"Well, no, Ma'am ; nor is it likely, after your orders —"

"Oh, the fact is, mother," interrupted Sir Richard with a little stammer, "I forgot to tell you about it ; but Rinkel informs me there has been considerable damage done by parties coming here from Dalwynch and other places, and therefore he has put up a notice to prohibit the whole thing in future."

And, indeed, upon the path leading to "the Folly," which could be approached by another way than that in front of the house, they presently came upon a board recently erected, which threatened trespassers with all the rigour of the law.

There was a bitter sneer upon Captain Lisgard's handsome face, at this assumption of authority upon the part of his brother, and it did not soften when my lady thoughtfully remarked : "Ah, well ; that will certainly make the place very private."

A curious reply, as Letty thought, at the time, for her mother to make, who was always so eager to oblige her neighbours, and who well knew how popular Lisgard's Folly was with the humbler class of townsfolk in the summer months. But she was destined to be vastly more astonished before that day was spent.

The little party, so strangely out of accord with one another, took their lunch, indeed, beneath the shadow of the Tower ; but all those harmonious elements which are

so absolutely essential to the success of a picnic were wanting. There were no high spirits, no good-humoured badinage, and not the ghost of a laugh. My lady, singularly silent even for her, gazed around her on the familiar landscape, or regarded the shuttered cottage with a mournful interest, as though they reminded her of happier times. Miss Aynton, careful of what my lady had enjoined, was studiously urbane to Sir Richard, but without obtaining the wished-for result; for while the baronet was thereby only rendered tolerably gracious, the captain grew intensely irritated. Poor Letty, who was the only one prepared to be agreeable, or had any expectation of enjoying herself, felt immensely relieved when the repast was concluded, and the horses were ordered to be "put to." As for strolling about the grounds, and pointing out their varied beauties to Rose, as she had counted upon doing, that was no longer to be thought of. Sir Richard, as usual, offered his arm in stately fashion to his mother; but Master Walter, lighting a cigar, stood for a few minutes looking down with knitted brow upon the lake, then sauntered after them, without saying a word, and with both hands in his pockets.

"Dear Rose," cried Letty, who watched these proceedings with little short of terror, "what have you said to make Walter so cross? I never saw him behave like that in my life. He did not even look at you. Would it be very wrong if you just ran after him, and said a word or two before we got into the carriage? I am so dreadfully afraid of a quarrel between him and Richard."

"Just as you please, Letty," returned Miss Aynton, looking pale, and a little frightened, too; and forcing a laugh, she tripped down the zigzag path in pursuit of the exasperated captain.

Letty waited a reasonable time, watching the footman collect the débris of the entertainment, and pack the plate, and then, supposing their difficulty had been adjusted, followed upon the track of her friend and Walter. The path was not only of a considerable length, but so

very steep, that one little zigzag overhung another ; thus, as she descended, she perceived through the thin spring foliage the two young people standing beneath her, although they were quite unconscious of her approach. She caught the last words of something Rose was saying ; those were, “Walter, dear.” She marked the girl stretch her arms towards him, as though she would have clasped them round his neck ; and then she saw Captain Lisgard, of her Majesty’s Light Dragoons, put her roughly by, shake himself free of her with a movement expressive almost of loathing, and turn upon his heels with an oath.





CHAPTER XIX.

THE FINESSE IN TRUMPS.

Tis the night before the Derby. The West End is thronged with men. The streets are perceptibly more thronged with well-dressed males than at any other time of the year. The May meetings brought enough of parsons and sober-coated laity to dull the living tide—to almost make us Londoners a mournful people (which we are, naturally, *not*, despite what Frenchmen say); but those grave ones have either departed from us, or are now lost and undistinguishable in this influx of gay company. All the new-comers are in their most gorgeous raiment, for is not this the great “gaudy” week of the wicked? Half the officers of cavalry in her Majesty’s service have obtained leave of absence for eight-and-forty hours upon urgent private affairs; and a fourth of the infantry have done the like; they have come up from every station within the four seas to see the great race run, which is to put in their pockets from five pounds to fifty thousand. Over their little books they shake their shining heads, and stroke their tawny moustaches in a deprecating manner, but each one has a secret expectation that “he shall pull it off this once;” for, upon the whole, our military friends have not been fortunate in turf transactions. There is a fair

sprinkling, too, of respectable country gentlemen, who rarely leave their family to occupy their old-bachelor quarters at *Long's* or the *Tavistock*, except on this supreme occasion. Every fast university-man who can obtain an *exeat* upon any pretence whatever—from sudden mortality in the domestic circle down to being *subpœnaed* by a friendly attorney in the suppositious case of *Hookey* (a blind man) *v.* *Walker*—is up in town resplendent, confident, young. Every sporting farmer, save those in the north, who have a private saturnalia of their own in the mid-autumn, has left his farm for two nights and a day, and is seeing life in London. Besides these, an innumerable host of well-dressed scoundrels—for whom the word “*Welcher*” is altogether too commendable—have come up from country quarters, where they have been playing various “little games,” all more or less discreditable, to work together for evil with their metropolitan *confrères* for four days.

Every haunt of dissipation is holding highest holiday. The stupid, obscene Cider Cellars find, for one night at least, that they have attractions still; the music-halls are tropical with heat and rankest human vegetation; Cremorne, after the crowded theatres have disgorged their steaming crowds, is like a fair. The strangers' room at all the clubs has been bespoken this night for weeks. In the card-rooms, the smoking-rooms, the billiard-rooms, there is scarcely space to move, far less to breathe in; yet there is everywhere a babblement of tongues, and the words that are most bandied about from feverish mouth to mouth, are first, *The King*; and secondly, *Menelaus*. The tout had kept his word—either from fear or nicest honour—until the stipulated week had elapsed, and then the news of the trial-race began to circulate: from its outsiders' place, to that of fourth favourite, then of third, and at last to that of second had “the French horse” gradually risen. A curious and illogical position enough—but then the turf-people *are* illogical—for if the news that he had beaten *The King* was true, he ought to have

been first favourite ; and if the news was *not* true, he had no reason to find favour at all. As it was, however, *The King* had come down half a point as if to meet him, to 9 to 2 ; while *Menelaus* stood at 5 to 1.

And had that trial-race really taken place or not? and if so, was it on the square? was the question which was just then agitating the Houses of Lords and Commons (nay, it was whispered, Marlborough House itself), and all the mess-tables in her Majesty's service, more than any other subject in this world. There was also a vague rumour that the favourite's "understandings" were not as they should be ; that there was a contraction that might be fatal to his prospects ; that the idol's feet were of clay. Ralph Derrick had "put the pot on" his *Many Laws*, and would be a millionaire if he won ; but Walter Lissard had put more than the pot. If the French colours did not show in front at the winning-post, the captain, still to use the elegant metaphor of the sporting fraternity, would be in queer street. So infatuated had the young man grown, that he had absolutely hedged even that one bet which insured him a thousand pounds in case *The King* should win the race. Notwithstanding his coyness in accepting the first offer of a loan from his un cultivated friend, he had borrowed of him twice since, in each case giving his I.O.U., whereby he endeavoured to persuade himself that he was liquidating all obligation ; yet, unless he considered his mere autograph was worth the sums for which it was pledged, I know not how he succeeded in this. For if *Menelaus* did not happen to win, he not only would not have enough to discharge his debts of honour for nearly two years—when he would come into possession of his patrimony of five thousand pounds—but even a great portion of *that* would be bespoken. Thus, of course, he had placed himself, through mere greed, in a most unpleasant position ; but at the same time it must be allowed that he had yielded to a great temptation, such as would probably have made the mouth of any financier water, had the opportunity offered in his

particular line ; for with the exception of mere outsiders, *The King* had beaten every horse that was to contend with him on the morrow ; and *Menelaus*, to Walter's certain knowledge, had beaten *The King*.

Equinely speaking, then, it was a certainty that the French horse should win the Derby, in which case the young man's gains would be prodigious ; for not only had he taken advantage of the original position of the animal in the betting, but as the odds grew less and less, had still backed him, until his possible winnings reached, on paper, to five figures ; on the other hand, by this last piece of imprudence, his possible—— But no, it was *not* possible. “Things surely wouldn't go so devilish cross with a fellow as that ;” or to put the captain's thought in other words, the Government of the Universe being founded upon just principles, would never permit such a stupendous misfortune to overwhelm him ; or, it might be, the gallant captain believed that Fortune was indeed a female, and would therefore hesitate to inflict calamity upon so pretty a fellow as himself. At the same time, the event of the morrow was so big with fate, that it was not pleasant to dwell upon it ; and anything which could have prevented his mind from recurring to the same, would have been welcomed gladly. But there was but one thing that had the power to do this. His anxiety was far too deep to be flattered away by the smile of beauty, or lost in the sparkle of wine. The homœopathic treatment, *similia similibus*, he felt was the only one that could now give him relief, and he therefore sought for rest from the cares of the race-course in the excitement of the gaming-table. Do not, however, let it be supposed that the captain sought out any of those convenient establishments for the immediate transfer of property, which are guarded by iron doors, and always liable to the incursions of the police, who, upon breaking in, discover four-and-twenty gentlemen (one of whom has swallowed the dice), sitting round a green baize table in conversation about music and the Fine Arts. Mater Walter was rash in his

speculations, but he was not madman enough to play chicken-hazard against foxes.

"I think I shall try my luck with the *Landrails* to-night," observed he to his companion Derrick, stopping short in flaring Piccadilly, and biting his nails. The two men had been occupying lodgings in the same house, the *Turf Hotel* being full; the younger finding a species of comfort in the society of the part-owner of *Menelaus*, who was even more confident of the success of that noble quadruped than himself.

"By all means, my lad," returned the gold-finder simply, "although I don't know what they are; and so as you take me with you, I don't care."

Three weeks ago, such a proposition would have staggered the captain, or rather, he would have rejected it point-blank. To be seen in public with his uncouth and flashily-attired friend, was at that time a considerable trial to the fastidious light dragoon; but the immense interest which they had in common, had rendered the familiarity of the once odious Orson at first tolerable, and eventually welcome, and even necessary. He had taken him with him into quite exclusive circles, and, except on one occasion at *the Rag*, where Derrick, having drunk more champagne than was good for him, had offered to fight Major Pompus of the Fusiliers for *what he liked*, nothing unpleasant had taken place in consequence. Men observed: "What a deuced rum fellow Lisgard brought with him the other night;" but the said stranger had lost his money very good-naturedly at the whist-table, and it was understood that he had more to lose. Under such circumstances, the gentlemen-players were very charitable. Mr. Ralph Derrick did not play a first-rate game at whist; very few persons who have not been brought up in good society do; but his performance was not so inferior as to make success impossible for a night or two, however certain the ruin that would have overtaken him in the long-run. Moreover, he was never "put off his head" by the largeness of the stake, his habitual lavishness in money

matters rendering him indifferent to that matter. Captain Lisgard, on the other hand, though an excellent player, considering his tender years, was liable to have his nerves disorganised at any crisis of a rubber upon which an unusual amount depended.

"Yes," repeated Master Walter, "I'll try my luck at the *Landrails*, and you shall coine, too, Ralph. Any member has a right to introduce whom he likes."

"Even a miner from Cariboo—eh, Master Walter, provided he's got money in his pocket? Well, I'm their man, whether it's for whist or all-fours."

"All-fours!" repeated the captain with irritation. "Who ever heard of a gentleman playing at that game? Do, pray, be particular in what you say to-night. Whatever you do, call a knave a knave, and not a *Jack*. The *Landrails* is a very select place, Ralph, where men who like to play their whist more quietly than at *the Rag* look in for an hour or two rather late."

"Heavier stakes, I suppose?" observed Derrick bluntly.

"Yes, rather. You see, there's always some row with the committee, if play gets beyond a certain height at the regular clubs. Now, this is a sort of friendly circle where the points are quite optional, and the bets too. Yes, I think I shall try my luck for a pony or two."

"I don't think you look quite fit for whist, my lad, to-night," returned Derrick, gazing gravely into the young man's haggard face. "To-morrow will be a trying day, remember; I think you had much better get to bed."

"I couldn't do it, man!" replied Walter vehemently—"I dare not. I should never sleep a wink, and perhaps go mad with thinking before the morning. Look here, how my hand trembles. I have not nerves of iron, like you."

"Poor lad, poor lad!" ejaculated the other with affectionate compassion. Nothing, as you say, ever makes me tremble—except D. T. Ah, Heaven, but that is

terrible ! Never drink, lad, never drink ; ” and something like a shudder throbbed through the speaker’s brawny frame.

“ The *Landrails* meet here,” said Walter, stopping at the door of a private house in the neighbourhood of St. James’s Palace ; “ it is past eleven, and I dare say play has begun.”

“ Who owns this house ? ” asked Derrick carelessly, surveying the unpretending tenement in question—“ or rather, who pays the rent ? ”

“ Well, I hope *we* shall, Ralph, this evening. The fact is, the hire of the rooms, the attendance, and even the cost of the refreshments, are all defrayed each night by the winners in proportion to their gains. Money does not change hands until the ensuing week, but the secretary enters all accounts in his ledger, and sees that they are duly squared. I am answerable for your liabilities to-night, so do you be careful with the liquors.”

As the youthful Mentor administered this wholesome piece of advice to his senior, the door opened, and they were admitted. It was a most respectable house, neither very large nor very small, and neatly but inexpensively furnished. The butler was a man who might have been the body-servant of an evangelical bishop, and whose conscience was troubled by the spiritual shortcomings of his right reverend master. To come upon so grave and sad a man upon the eve of the Derby Day, was quite a homily in itself. Through the open door of the dining-room could be seen a cold collation, at which men dropped in from above stairs if they felt so disposed ; but there were light refreshments in the drawing-room also, and a great variety of pleasant drinks. The *Landrails* were thirsty folks, and imbibed gallons of iced hock and Seltzer water ; but they had not, as a rule, good appetites. There were three tables for whist, and one dedicated to piquet or écarté. All these had massive candlesticks screwed into their wood-work — perhaps only to prevent their falling off ; but it also put a stop to any

possible use of them as a weapon or missile, and I think that contingency had been also taken into account. A candlestick comes uncommonly handy to the fingers when luck has gone pertinaciously against one, and the man who has won all the money is personally hateful. Above all things, it was important, in that quiet, friendly circle, to repress all ebullition of temper, and to steer clear of all disputes. Nobody, one would hope, who was in a position to be admitted to that society, would stoop to cheating ; but a little strap was inserted at the opposite corners of each table for the convenience of marking the score, wherein, when the counters were once placed, they could not be accidentally removed by the elbow.*

The spacious room—for it was a double drawing-room—was by no means brilliantly lit up ; a couple of bare wax candles stood upon the refreshment-table ; where, by-the-bye, there was no attendant, each man helping himself at pleasure ; but the other four pair in the room had shades over them, which dulled their radiance, although it caused them to throw a very bright light upon the tables themselves. When the new comers entered, which they did quite unannounced, the sight struck one of them at least as a very strange one : three shining isles of light—for one whist-table was not in use—amid a sea of gloom ; ten thoughtful faces with a sort of halo round them, and one or two sombre ones standing by like their evil genii, and watching the play. There was not a sound to be heard at first, except the dull fall of the pieces of pasteboard, but presently a hand being finished in their neighbourhood, a sort of hushed talk began about what would have happened if somebody had under-played the diamond.

“What are the points?” whispered Derrick in his companion’s ear.

* Persons who are acquainted with the game of whist have informed me, that it is sometimes better—in the case of holding two by honours, for instance—to be at three than four.

"What are the points to-night, Beamish?" inquired Walter of one of the four, a very unimpassioned-looking young man, who replied with a most unpleasant and ghastly smile—as though he had cut his throat a little too high up: "Fives and fifties, my gallant captain, with the odds in ponies; so, being a younger son, I advise you to go to some other table."

"Never mind, I am going to make a good marriage," returned Walter coolly. Mr. Beamish had been a penniless government clerk until he wedded the widow of an opulent builder with half a town for her jointure. "If you are not full," added the captain, "I declare in here, for myself and friend."

All four looked up for an instant at the threatened stranger; for your good player, intent on gain, detests the introduction of an unknown hand. Somehow or other, although the odds are two to one, "it's always his cursed luck to have him for a partner." General Prim, who had been a martinet in the Peninsula, and as offensive to his fellow-creatures as less favourable circumstances had permitted ever since, gave a ferocious grin, and shook his single scalp-lock of gray hair like a malignant pantaloon. The Hon. Pink Hawthorne, attaché at the court at Christiana, but absent from that lively capital upon sick-leave, wrenched his fair moustache this way and that, and frowned as gloomily as his foolish forehead would permit. The dealer, a Mr. Roberts, an ancient bencher of one of the Inns of Court, paused with the trump card in his fingers still unturned. "Does your friend know what the Blue Peter means, Lisgard?"

"I've been a sailor half my life, Sir, and it's devilish odd if I did *not*," returned Ralph Derrick grimly.

"What the devil did the fellow mean?" added he to Walter as the game began, and all the four became at once automatons.

"It's the new system of asking for trumps," answered Walter peevishly. "The same thing that they called the Pilot the other night. How ridiculous you have made

yourself. See, there's another table up. Bless the man, not there, that's the piquet place."

Ralph had quietly seated himself next to Major Piccalilli, of the Irregular Cavalry, Cayenne Station, Upper India, and had already disturbed his marking-cards, whereby that gallant officer was reduced to the verge of apoplexy with speechless rage.

"Stay, you shall stick to this one," continued Walter in a low voice; "that fellow Beamish is hateful to me—and I will cut in yonder. There is not a muff-table in the room—all these beggars play too well." With these words, the captain hurried away; and as soon as the rubber he had been watching was finished, Derrick was admitted of the conclave, to the exclusion of General Prim, who cursed that circumstance very audibly, and for a man of his advanced years, with considerable emphasis and vigour. Derrick fell as a partner to the lot of the gentleman who had inquired as to his proficiency in the art of asking for trumps.

"If you would only hold your cards a *little* more on the table, I should be able to see them myself," remarked Mr. Roberts with severity.

"If they look over my hands, Sir," returned Derrick reassuringly, "I will forgive 'em: that's all.—If you won't take that old gentleman's bets"—referring to the general, who seemed extremely anxious to back their adversaries—"then I will;" and he did it—and luck went with him. There was nothing stronger than champagne to be got at in that respectable place of business, so Ralph kept his head, and won—a hundred and fifty pounds or so. Then, the table breaking up, he rose and stood over his young friend, to see how the cards were going with him.

"Bad," muttered Derrick to himself, as he watched Walter running through his hand with eager haste, as a woman flirts her fan. His beautiful face was dark with care, his eyes flashed impatiently upon the man whose turn it was to lead.

"Our odds are in fifties, eh, Lisgard?" drawled his

right-hand adversary, Captain and Lieutenant Wobegon of the Horse Guards' azure.

"The same as before, I suppose," returned the young man haughtily.

Ralph gave a prolonged whistle. His young friend had a treble up, and the others nothing, so that he must be betting two hundred and fifty pounds to one hundred; and "the same as before" too! Within the next minute, the cards were thrown down upon the table, and the adversaries scored a treble likewise. "That's been my cursed luck, Ralph, all to-night!" cried the young man with a little grating laugh. "Four by honours against one every deal."

"You must have been doing something devilish bad, Lisgard," observed the Guardsman.

"Yes, I have—playing;" answered Walter bitterly. "But no fellow *can* play with sixes and sevens; it demoralises one so."

"All cards do, my grandmother says," answered Wobegon, who for a Guardsman was not without humour. "She made me promise, when she paid my debts, my first Derby, that I would never back anything again; and I never have, except my luck and bills."

Captain Lisgard had naturally a keen appreciation of fun, but he did not vouchsafe a smile to the facetious Guardsman, who himself joked like an undertaker, and had never been known to laugh in his life. The fact was, that nothing could just now commend itself to Master Walter except winning back his money.

Reader, did you ever play for more than you can afford? Pardon me the inquiry; there is no occasion to be Pharisaical; for it is even possible to do worse things than that in your life: moreover, the question of what is more than you can afford is such a large one, and affords such opportunities for a nimble conscience to escape. I remember in Lord Houghton's *Life of Keats*, that that gallant nobleman, in defending the poet from the charge of dissipation and gambling, remarks that it all arose

from his having lost ten pounds upon a certain evening at cards. Now, considering that the author of *Hypcrion* had no income, nor any bank except his imagination to apply to—and it was notorious that he could never put a cheque even upon *that*—I take his lordship to be a very charitable peer. Ten pounds must have been, for Keats, a large sum. But, undoubtedly, the matter is one for a man to decide for himself; the whole question is relative; and if you are apt to lose your temper, then remember you play for more than you can afford, although your stakes are but—penny stamps. Captain Walter Lisgard had lost his temper and his money also. There was a numbed sense of misfortune pervading him; it seemed to him as though he was predestinated to lose. I am much mistaken if he had not a sort of humming in his ears. One of the most religious men whom it has been my fortune to meet, has informed me that, in his unregenerate days, when he was a gambler and everything else,* he once *prayed to win* at cards.

“Then it strikes me,” said I, “in addition to your other backslidings at the time you speak of, you were just a trifle blasphemous.”

“No, Sir,” said he; “I think not. All that I possessed in the world was depending upon the result of a certain game at écarté. If I had lost it, I should have been a beggar. If I won it, I resolutely resolved never to touch a card again—never to run the risk of experiencing a second time the mental agony I was then undergoing. I am not ashamed to confess, Sir, that in such a strait I prayed to win, and I *did* win.”

“All I have to say, Sir,” replied I, “is this: that it was uncommonly hard upon the other man.”

Good resolutions are indeed by no means uncommon among tolerably young persons in positions of pecuniary

* “Every sin, Sir, in the Decalogue, I am glad to say, have I committed”—meaning that the present change in him was rendered thereby all the more satisfactory—“with the sole exception of murder.”

peril, such as that of Captain Lisgard. They vow their candles to this and that patron saint if they should but escape shipwreck upon the green baize this once. Master Walter's bid was confined to a few "dips," if one may use so humble a metaphor, of which about fifty went to the pound, and even those were not offered in a penitent spirit. He would never play whist with the *Landrals* any more. He would never lay the long odds beyond "couters"—a foolish word he and his set used for sovereigns. He would never back himself at all when playing with "that fool Pompus"—his present partner. He would become, in short, exceedingly wise and prudent, if he should only "pull off" this present rubber. There was "life in the mussel" yet. They were at "three all" when Pompus led his knave, instead of his ten, from ten, knave, king, and only got the trick when he should have got the game.

"We shall never have another chance now," sighed Walter, as his left-hand adversary turned up the queen. But privately he thought that fortune would not be quite so cruel as all that came to; moreover, he had an excellent hand. His fingers trembled as he arranged the long suit of clubs, headed by tierce major, and saw that he had four trumps to bring them in with.

As the game went on, however, Pompus exhibited his usual feebleness, and things began to look very black indeed. In the third round of trumps, Master Walter's memory left him sudden as an extinguished taper. It is sad to have to say it of so excellent a player, but he recollects nothing whatever, except that, if he lost that rubber, it would be an addition of three hundred pounds to the sum he already owed Captain Wobegon. It was his turn to play, and he was third hand. He had the king and ten of trumps. The ace had been played: ay, he remembered that after a struggle, and the knave too. Yes, his left-hand adversary had played the knave. Should he finesse his ten or not? That was the question, upon the decision of

which depended some five hundred pounds. Whist is not always a game of pleasure. Master Walter finessed the ten. “Thousand devils!” cried Derrick with a tremendous imprecation, “why, the queen was *turned up* on your left, lad: you have thrown away the game.” And it was so. Walter Lisgard did not speak a word; but having compared his note-book with that of Captain Wobegon, retired into a little office out of the back drawing-room, where the secretary of the *Landrails* entered the members’ somewhat complicated little accounts with one another in a very business-like-looking ledger. “You have had a bad night of it for *you, Sir*,” remarked this gentleman quietly; “you generally hold your own.”

“Yes. What is the cursed total?”

“Eighteen hundred.”

“Ralph Derrick,” said Walter Lisgard, as the two walked up St. James’s Street towards their lodgings for bath and breakfasts, but scarcely for bed, since the morning was already far advanced—“if any horse but *Menelaus* wins the race, I am a ruined man.”





CHAPTER XX.

MR. WITHERS WITHDRAWS HIMSELF.

WHEN Derrick and the captain met at the breakfast-table upon that Derby morning, there was a note for the latter waiting by his plate. It had been brought over from the *Turf Hotel* with apologies, having been detained there by mistake, "through everybody being so busy," for at least a week. As he turned it moodily over without opening it, Ralph saw that it had the Mirk postmark.

"You have a letter from home, I see, lad; lucky dog!"

"Yes, very lucky," replied the young man cynically, as he ran his eye over the contents; "worse than my infernal luck of last night, and only less than the misfortune I am looking for to-day is the news in this letter."

"How is that, lad?"

"Well, you will hear some day."—Here he took the note, and slowly tore it lengthways into thin strips, and then across, so that it lay in a hundred fragments.—"But it's a secret, at least it was until a week ago, but being in a woman's hands, of course she let it slip;" and Master Walter looked as near to "ugly" as it was possible for his handsome face to go.

"I fancied your folks at home were unaware of your having intended to be at the *Turf Hotel*, and rather thought you were with your regiment like a good boy."

The captain returned no answer; but Derrick, who was in excellent spirits notwithstanding the anxieties of the coming day, continued to address him in that healthy and cheerful strain which is the most intolerable of all manners to one who is melancholy, and what is worse, in dread suspense. "Now, for my part, Walter, any letter in a woman's hand, as I think yours is—nay, you foolish lad, if you hadn't stuffed it into your breast pocket so quickly, I protest I should have thought it had come from your mother or your sister. Why, you don't mean to say that that pretty little gatekeeper down at Mirk writes letters to handsome Master Walter?"

"And why not?" asked the captain defiantly. "If it had come from Mistress Forest, then, indeed, you might have taken upon yourself to object, although I understand that even there you have not yet obtained the position of bridegroom-elect."

"No," returned Derrick drily. "I was about to say that *I* should have welcomed any letter in a woman's hand, especially if it began 'My dearest——'"

"What the devil do you mean by looking over my letter?" exclaimed Master Walter, starting up in a fury.

"Nothing," answered the other, purple with laughter and muffin; "I never dreamed of such a thing. But since you said it came from the gatekeeper's daughter, I thought I'd make a shot. The idea of my wanting to read all the pretty things the little fool writes to a wicked young dog like you; it's no fun to me to watch a moth at a candle. But what a spoiled lad it is! Why, here I have had no letter at all from Mirk, and yet I am content. Silence gives consent, they say; and particularly in this case, when I know nothing but your lady-mother prevents Mary writing 'My dearest Ralph' to me. Indeed, if she wrote 'Dear Sir, I can have no more to do with you,' it would not have the smallest effect. What I have made up my mind to do, generally comes to pass. Where there's a *will*—that is, supposing it is strong enough—there is most times a *way*."

"I know you're a devil of a fellow," sneered Master Walter, rising and gazing out of window at the bustling street already astir with the Derby vehicles; "but I am afraid your *will* can't win me this race."

"It's done a great deal towards it, Captain Lisgard. It brought about the trial-race with the 'crack,' although my lord did give himself such cursed airs, and not only let you in for a good thing, but lent you the money to take advantage of it to the uttermost."

"That's true," said Walter frankly, and holding out his thin white hand. "I dare say you think me an ungrateful beast, but I'm worried by a matter that you know nothing of; besides——"

"Not another word, lad—not another word; I am a rude rough creature, and I said some unpleasant things myself.—Here is our hansom, and with light-green curtains of gauze. I'm cursed if I go down to Epsom with the colours of *The King* on my cab. Why, the beggar must have done it to insult us."

"Stuff and nonsense, Ralph; it's only to keep off the dust. If you have no curtains, you must wear a veil, that's all. Look there, in yonder barouche and four, every man has a green veil on. By Heaven! that Wo-begon's one of 'em. He's got my I.O.U. for fifteen hundred pounds in his waistcoat-pocket; and there's that ugly devil Beamish, too.—Well," muttered the captain to himself, "I'm glad I didn't go with *that* party, at all events."

Master Walter, who was as popular in town as elsewhere, had been asked to take a seat for that day in half-a-dozen "drags" and barouches, but he had preferred to go alone with Derrick; not that he enjoyed his companionship, but because, as I have before said, he gathered some comfort from his society under the present cloud of anxiety and apprehension.

"I say, Walter, you are a pretty fellow; you forgot all about the provisions, but see here," cried Derrick triumphantly, pulling a hamper from under the sofa; "a

pigeon-pie, a fowl, two bottles of champagne, and one of brandy!"

"What confounded nonsense!" returned the young man peevishly. "There are dozens of parties who would have given us lunch. The idea of a hamper on the top of a hansom!"

"Well, come, you are wrong anyway, *there*, lad, for I have seen a dozen going by this morning."

"Very likely, and you have also seen plenty of vans, each with a barrel of ale. However, it's of no consequence. If the Frenchman wins, I could eat periwinkles out of a hand-barrow with a hair-pin; and if he loses—why, then, I shall not have much appetite."

"Look here, lad," replied Derrick gravely, "this sort of thing won't do. Never be down on your luck, until, at all events, your luck is down upon you. You are not cut out for this work, *I* can see. A man ought to be sanguine, yet cool; hopeful of gain—yet quite prepared for loss, who goes in for such a stake as you have got upon to-day's race. A gambler should be all brain, and no heart, let me suggest, before we start, that you should just take a little brandy."

"No, no!" ejaculated the captain impatiently. "If I am a funk, as you so delicately hint, I am not a fool. Come, let's be off. The next time I see this room again, I shall be a made man—or a beggar."

To any man, who risks by betting more than he can conveniently spare, the going to the Derby is by no means a cheerful expedition, whatever his coming home may chance to be; and further, it may be observed, that of all professional persons, those who take up the Turf as their line in life, are the most sombre and unlively. Many of them are clever fellows enough, and one or two are honest men, but there is no such thing as fun among them. The Ring would never take to the snowballing one another, as the stockbrokers have been known to do when 'Change was dull. They have only a certain grim and cruel humour, such as the Yankees use, the point of

which lies always in overreaching one another. Derrick was right when he said that Master Walter was not fit for such a calling, but the same thing might, almost with equal force, have been said of himself. He was not, indeed, of an anxious disposition, but his temper, when once roused, was almost demoniacal, and he could never stand being cheated. Now, cheating, in some form or other, is the soul of the Turf.

Whenever it is possible to trot in that vast procession down to Epsom, the appearance of which is so gay, and the pace so funereal, the large-wheeled hansom does it. Many a pretentious four-in-hand did the captain and Derrick pass, and many a wicked-looking brougham with its high stepping steeds ; and the occupants of each had often a word to say about “the fellow with the beard that Lisgard had picked up, and was carrying about with him everywhere.” For the manly growth that fringed Ralph Derrick’s chin was something portentous, even in these days of beards, and his appearance was rendered still more striking from the fact of his wearing an infinite number of wooden dolls in the band of his hat, where Louis XI. used to stick the images of his patron saints. In vain Walter had informed him that this was a weakness only indulged in by snobs. Ralph rejoined (but not without an extra tinge of red in his weather-beaten cheek), that being a snob himself, it was therefore only natural that he (Ralph) should take pleasure in thus adorning himself. He had rather be a snob than a nob, by a precious sight ; he knew that. As for making an exhibition of himself, if that was really the case, it was only right that the public should be advertised of the matter, so he purchased a penny trumpet, and executed thereon the most discordant flourishes. “Say another word, lad,” added he, with a cheerful malice, “and blessed if I don’t buy a false nose !”

Walter made no further remonstrance ; he leaned back in the hansom as far he could, and as much behind the green gauze curtain, until they reached the course, when

his companion divested himself of the objectionable ornaments, and made a present of a live tortoise, which he had also acquired on the way, to an importunate gipsy woman, instead of crossing her palm as requested "with a piece of silver." They could hear by this time the hum and the roar of the great human sea which surged about the railings in front of the Grand Stand, and in a few minutes more they were within them. They pushed their way through the babbling throng towards a certain corner that had been agreed upon, and there was Mr. Tite Chifney waiting for them, with a very pale face indeed.

"Nothing wrong with the horse, is there?" cried Ralph in a loud and menacing voice, which caused not a few sharp eyes to glance cunningly towards them, and set not a few sharp ears to listen to what might come next.

"No, Sir, nothing," returned the trainer. "For Heaven's sake, speak low. I never saw him looking better in my life. We will see him now, if you like."

"Where's Blanquette?" continued Ralph, a little reassured by this, as they moved away towards the paddock.

"Mr. Blanquette is not here, Mr. Deirick."

"Not here? Why, he was to join you the day before yesterday, otherwise I would have come myself."

"He *has* been here, Sir, but he's gone away again."

"What? Is he not coming back to-day?"

"I hope so, Sir, I most sincerely hope so; but the fact is—now take it quietly, for it's none of my fault—he's gone after Jack Withers."

In an instant, while Walter ejaculated a smothered cry of agony and wrath, Derrick had seized the trainer by the throat. "You know me, Sir," cried he. "As I swore to treat that tout on the downs at Mirk, so will I treat you, if that jockey——"

But two blue-coated men had thrust themselves between the strong man and his victim; a gentleman in a tight-buttoned frock-coat was coming up, too, in plain clothes, with that swift determined stride peculiar to members of

“the force,” and the crowd grew very thick about them, and a thousand eyes were being concentrated upon Ralph’s furious face, he knew. If his temper was lost now, he felt that all was lost. With an effort that almost cost him a fit of apoplexy—“I am sorry,” said he, “that I laid my hand upon you, Mr. Chifney.”

“That will do,” returned the trainer quietly, arranging his neckcloth. “Mr. Inspector, you know me, and there is no occasion for your services.”

“All right, Mr. Chifney, but you have got a rummish customer to deal with there,” replied the guardian of the law, stroking his chin, and looking at Derrick, much as a vice-president of the Zoological Society might regard a novelty in wild beasts, that had been half-promised to the establishment, and then withdrawn.

“I have never been treated thus,” complained the trainer, as the three moved away, and the gaping crowd gathered round some other object of attraction, “and have never deserved such treatment from any employer of mine, although I have kept racing-stables these thirty years. I can make some allowance for one who has so much money on this horse, as I know *you* have, Mr. Derrick, but I give you my honour and word that I was as astounded as Mr. Blanquette himself, when I heard the news that Jack had skedaddled. He was your own jockey, remember, not mine: no boy in my stables has ever played such a scurvy trick as this.”

“Have you any boy that can take this scoundrel’s place?” asked Captain Lisgard impatiently.

“I have got as good riders as can be got, Master Walter, upon so short a notice; and *Menelaus* shall have the pick of them. But you know what a devil of a temper the horse has; and this Withers was the only lad who understood him.”

“How comes it that Blanquette has gone to look for him?” asked Derrick thoughtfully. “Does he know where he is likely to be found?”

“Not as I know of, Sir,” returned the trainer gravely.

"He said he would bring him back dead or alive—those were his words."

"Stop a moment, Chifney," ejaculated Ralph. "I can scarcely find breath to utter even the suspicion of it; and the certainty would, I verily believe, choke me; but do you think it possible that all is not quite on the square with Blanquette himself?"

"Well, Mr. Derrick, I'd rather not say. Mr. Blanquette is as much the owner of the horse as yourself. He's my employer too—and nobody ever heard Tite Chifney breathe a word—"

"Thousand devils!" cried Derrick, stamping his foot so that the print of it was left in the yielding turf; "is this a time for your senseless scruples? I ask you, do you think it possible that this man—my pal for years, one that has oftentimes faced death in my company, and once shared the last scanty meal that stood between us and starvation—do you think it possible, I say, that this man has sold the race?"

"Well, Sir," replied Mr. Chifney frankly, "about victuals eaten under the circumstances you describe, of course I'm no judge; but as to friendship and that, I've known a son play his own father false upon the turf before now; and what an Englishman will do in the way of smartness, you may take your oath a Frenchman will do—and a deuced sight worse too. Moreover, since you press this question, I may say that your partner has been seen talking with Wiley—Lord Stonart's agent—more than once."

"And why, in the devil's name, was I not told?"

"That was not my business, Mr. Derrick; you might not have thanked me for interfering with your affairs. I thought that you and Mr. Blanquette were one. Besides, to confess the truth, I thought it was *The King* who was being nobbled. And since Lord Stonart has chosen to withdraw his horses from my keeping—chiefly, by-the-bye, through his disgust at that trial-race in which his crack was beaten—I, of course, was no longer bound to look

after his interests ; no, indeed, quite the reverse," added the trainer with an offended air.

"Did this Frenchman say he would be here to-day, if he did not find the boy?" inquired Captain Lingard sharply, with an unpleasant look in his fine eyes.

"I can answer that question for him," returned the gold-digger grimly. "If he has played me false, he will not only not be *here*; he will have put the sea—and not the narrow one either—between himself and Ralph Derrick; for he knows me very well. But now—" here he drew a long breath, and made a motion with his mighty arms as though he would dismiss that matter for the present, tempting as it was to dwell upon—"let us see the boy that is to take this rascal's place. We may pull through still with luck."





CHAPTER XXI.

AT EPSOM.

MAVE you ever seen at the beginning of a great law case a certain hush and stir among the gentlemen of the long robe, and then a young man rise—not much over forty, that is—and inform “my lud” that his unfortunate client was placed at a sad disadvantage, for that, through the unexpected but unavoidable absence of his leader, the whole case must needs devolve upon his own (the junior’s) shoulders? The circumstance is of course most lamentable, but still the young counsel (if he is worth a guinea fee) has a certain confident radiance about him, for he feels that his opportunity has come at last, and that he has but “to grasp the skirts of happy chance,” to be borne from that moment woolsackwards. So was it that Mr. Samuel Hicks, horse-jockey unattached, when suddenly called upon to fill the vacant seat of Brother Withers, absent without leave. To ride a Derby at a moment’s notice was, to one in his position, almost what to take the command of the Mediterranean squadron would be to a young gentleman at the naval school. But not a trace of indecision was visible on the young centaur’s countenance.

“I will do my best, gentlemen,” said he modestly; then added, with the irrepressible assurance of his class, “and I think I know how to ride.”

"You know nothing, and are an infernal young fool," returned the trainer sharply. "You never were outside of such a horse as *Menelaus* in your life. If he is in a good temper, a child might steer him; but if he jibs—if he stands stock-still in that great race an hour hence, as he is as like to do as not—what will you do then?"

"Bless my soul, Sir," cried the boy, his golden future—not without "mother in a comfortable cottage, and easy for life," let us hope, in the foreground—all swept away by this relentless prediction—"Bless my soul, Sir, I think I should cut his throat."

"I like this fellow," cried Derrick, slapping the lad upon the back. "Look you, here is twenty pounds, which you may keep in any case, and you had better take it now, for if you lose the race, there will be plenty of folks to want all my money. But if you win, boy, I will make it two hundred."

"And I will make it four," added Master Walter fervently.

"So, you see, you will be a made man for life," remarked the trainer kindly. "But listen to me, Sam, or else all this glitter will be the merest moonshine. Be sure never touch your horse with whip or spur; for Withers, I have noticed, never did. But if the beast jibs—I saw Jack do this at the trial-race, and once before—snatch at his ear. There may be some secret in the way of handling it, but there is no time for finding that out. Do you twist it hard?"

"Oh, Sir, I'll twist it off, but he shall win," returned the jockey plaintively; and off he went to don his new owner's colours—black and red—as proudly as an ensign to his first battle-field.

It had got about that there was some hitch about *Menelaus*, and the odds were rising rapidly against him; and when the large and somewhat ungainly animal took his preparatory canter in front of the stand under the guidance of the uncelebrated Hicks, they rose still higher. If any of his ancient confidence had remained

to Captain Lisgard, he could scarcely have resisted the tempting offers that were being roared out in harsh and nasal tones from every quarter of the ring.

"I'll lay 7 to 1 against *Many Laws*" (for most of the racing fraternity favoured Mr. Derrick's pronunciation of that name). "I'll lay 8 to 1."

"I'll take 4 to 1 I name the winner" (for the relation between *The King* and the French horse in the betting was that of buckets in a well.)

"I take odds that *Menelaus* is not placed," exclaimed a shrill and sneering voice close beside where the two men most interested in that depreciated animal were standing.

"What odds will you take, my lord?" inquired Captain Lisgard, biting his lip in wrath, for it was Lord Stonart who was offering them, the man whose confidential agent had been talking with Blanquette, and to whose machinations it was almost certainly owing that *Menelaus* had lost his rider.

"Ah, Lisgard, how are you?" returned he coolly. "How came it that I missed you just now in the paddock? Haven't seen **you** since that morning on Mirk Down. So we're going to try that race over again, eh?"

"I think you were asking for odds, my lord, about the black horse being *placed*?" rejoined the captain, pale with passion at the sarcasm that lurked in the other's tone.

"Yes, so I was. There has something gone amiss, they say, with him. I'll take 4 to 1 in fifties—hundreds, if you like."

"Don't do it," whispered Derrick eagerly. "Don't you see what the scoundrel reckons upon? If the horse runs straight, he will win the race, but if he jibs, he will be nowhere. He is therefore taking odds where he ought to give them."

"You don't take me, eh?" continued his lordship. "Well, I think your friend advises you wisely. See, the horses are moving towards the hill. Like myself, you have no stall, I conclude. Where are you going to place

yourself? I think I shall remain below here on the green."

"Then I shall see the race from the roof, my lord," answered the captain savagely, and thither he and his companion betook themselves accordingly.

To look down from that elevation upon Epsom Downs just before the start for the great race, is to behold a wondrous spectacle. Men—a quarter of a million or so—as black and thick as bees, and emitting much such a hum and clangour as attends the swarming of those perilous insects ; and the carriages, twelve deep—dwarfed to much the same proportions as those chariots which used to be dragged in public by the Industrious Fleas. But raise your race-glass, and with a single sweep you survey every social degree of human life ; from the duchess to the poor drunken hag on the look-out for empty bottles ; from the peer to the ragged thief who bides his moment to snatch his booty from his lordship's carriage-seat. This rascal's opportunity is coming. If there are five minutes in an Englishman's life in which he is indifferent to the preservation of his property, it is those five which are now at hand when that little jockey rainbow yonder is gathering on the hill. Thirty of the fleetest horses in the world are about to contend for the greatest prize that horse can win : it is not that circumstance, however, which makes so many hearts go pit-a-pat, keeps all lips sealed, and rivets every eye, except that of the pick-pocket and his natural enemy the policeman, upon that shifting speck of colour. All are aware of the enormous interests that hang upon the result impending, even if they have none themselves ; vague but gigantic shadows of loss and gain forecast themselves upon every mind. In a few seconds more, certain unknown scoundrels—fellow-creatures, however, with whom we have indissoluble sympathies—will be enriched beyond the dreams of avarice ; and certain other poor devils will be ruined. A solemn hush pervades all Pandemonium. The very organ-grinders cease their hateful discord ; the

vendors of race-cards give their lungs brief respite ; the proprietors of *Aunt Sallies* intermit their useless cry of “Three throws a penny,” and stand on tiptoe, with their *fasces* beneath their arms, as eager as my lord who totters insecure erect upon the front seat of his drag. Nervous folks see all these things because they cannot keep their eyes fixed where they would. A sudden roar breaks forth, not in the least like human speech, but it means that they are off!

“*Are they off, Ralph?*” inquires Master Walter of his companion, “or is it a lie?” His small and well-gloved hand is trembling so, that his race-glass gives him views like a kaleidoscope. Splendour, or penury—nay, worse, or shame await him, and are at the threshold. He knows not yet the foot of which it is that draws so nigh : and he dares not look forth to see.

“They are not off yet, lad,” returned Ralph ; and even *he* has to swallow something which appears to be in his throat, but is not, before he can give that assurance.

Master Walter draws a long breath, for this is a reprieve, and éndeavours once more to fix his eyes upon the dancing horses ; but it is the retina of the mind only which presents its image. He beholds his mother’s face, paler and more careworn than ever, sharpened with pain, through something which she has learned since—

“They’re off! they’re off!” is again the cry ; and this time the great plane of faces shifts and flashes as it follows the speck of colour now in rapid motion—at first, a double line, next a lengthening oval, and then a string of brilliants, knotted here and there. As they approach Tattenham Corner, Walter perceives, for the first time, that they are horses, and that three are leading all the rest—Green, Black, and Yellow. The chances are then but two to one against him. How they lag and crawl, these vaunted coursers of the air? How long is this frightful suspense to last? “The Yellow’s beat—*Mica*

is out of it—the Black wins—the favourite is beaten, blast him ;—*Menelaus* wins——” There is a thunder of hoofs, a flash of Black and Green, then a cry such as, even on Epsom Downs, was never before heard. “ By Heaven, he’s off ! The boy is killed ! Was it short of the post ? What number’s up ? The Green has won. *The King, The King !* Hurrah, hurrah !” And so the babblement breaks forth again, and the tumultuous crowd flows in like water upon the fair green course, save one small space of it kept clear by men with staves, where lies a poor whitefaced jockey, senseless and motionless, for whose misfortune everybody is sorry, but especially those who have backed the Black.

All had gone well with the French horse until within a few strides of the winning-post ; he was leading by half a length, and his victory seemed certain to all eyes, when suddenly—whether through the devilish nature of the beast, or whether poor Sam had touched him with the heel in that overwhelming crisis, can never now be known—but he stopped stock-still, and shot his rider (snatching at his ear as he flew by) a dozen yards, like cricket-ball from catapult. The uncelebrated Hicks had actually preceeded the rival jockey at the post, but left his horse behind him ; and there the beast was standing yet, with his fore-feet planted resolutely before him, and his untwisted ears laid level with his neck, as though he was giving “ a back ” at leap-frog.

“ Come down, and let us get away from this, lad,” broke forth Derrick impatiently ; “ it is no use waiting here.”

“ It is no use waiting here,” echoed the young man mechanically, as he followed his friend through the fast-thinning crowd down to the basement story.

At the foot of the staircase they met Mr. Chifney, looking very white and disconcerted. He, too, had put more trust than he was wont to place in horses in *Menelaus*, and had suffered in consequence ; and the wily trainer was not used to losses.

"How is the boy?" inquired Derrick.

"Bad, Sir, bad: it is a bad business altogether," muttered the man of horseflesh, not perhaps wholly thinking of the boy.

"It was not his fault, however," continued Ralph. "No man could have kept his seat during such a devil's trick. Look you, let him have all he requires; everything. I will be responsible."

Mr. Chifney had expected from this stormy client some terrible outbreak of wrath and disappointment; and lo, he was all benevolence and charity! His astonishment exhibited itself significantly enough in his face; but Ralph mistook the cause.

"Why do you stare so, Sir? I suppose I am good for a few pounds yet. The horse is mine; and I apprehend will be security enough; though I wish I could afford to shoot him—cursed beast! Where is Lord Stonart?"

"A great personage has, I have heard, just sent for him, to offer his congratulations."

Ralph Derrick uttered a harsh and bitter laugh.

"I suppose we couldn't see this interesting interview, eh?"

"Certainly not, Sir," replied the trainer hurriedly, alarmed by Derrick's tone and air. "I hope you are not thinking of putting us all in the wrong by any act of violence?"

"Well, no; I thought of conferring the honour of knighthood upon his lordship with a horsewhip—that's all."

"Take him away," whispered the trainer to Master Walter; "for Heaven's sake, take him home."

"Yes, home. Come home, Ralph," repeated the young man, like one in a dream.

"Ha, Lisgard, how goes it?" drawled Captain Wobegon, sauntering slowly up to where the three were standing. "I hope you recouped yourself for last night's misfortunes by *The King* just now. Devilish near thing,

though. The Frenchman did win by a head, but luckily it was the boy's, and not his own."

"I backed the wrong horse," returned Master Walter gloomily. "And I owe you—how much is it?"

"A little over fourteen hundred. If it's any convenience to you, I can wait a fortnight or so; I would say longer—but Lurline—she was inquiring after you, only yesterday, by-the-bye; I felt quite jealous—has a soul above economy. And after the Derby, you know, folks send in their bills; especially jewellers. They know if they are not paid *then*, it's a bad look-out. What a lot that fellow Stonart must have netted! I'm sorry to see you so down in the mouth; you used to be such a lucky fellow."

"Used to be such a lucky fellow," mused Master Walter, as he and his companion made their way to the outskirts of the heath, where a place had been appointed at which their hansom was to wait for them. "Yes, so I was. I used to win in a small way, and yet people were always glad to see me. They won't be so pleasant, I reckon, when they find that I am a defaulter. I can't get at any money for a year, and who'll wait a year without making a row? Even if they do, mine will be a fine coming of age. How *could* I have been such a frightful fool!"

"Tell your fortune, my pretty gentleman," observed a gipsy girl, laying her walnut-coloured fingers upon the young man's coat-sleeve. "You are born under a lucky star."

"I may have been born there; but I have wandered far away from its influence," replied Master Walter, shaking her hand off somewhat roughly. "If you want a shilling, you shall have it; for I have nothing but other people's money about me, and that one always parts with very readily. But don't call me lucky, for that's a lie, you jade."

"Bless your handsome face," returned the gipsy humbly, "it's a shame that it ever should be crossed

by the shadow of sorrow. You can't be unlucky, Sir, with eyes like yours — especially," added she, as the two strode hastily away — "especially among the ladies."

"Do you hear *that*, lad?" laughed Derrick encouragingly; but the young man was too wrapt up in his own sombre thoughts to heed such things.

"I must sell out," muttered he to himself; "that's the first thing. And I must run down to Mirk; there is no knowing what that spitfire there may do else."

"Here's our hansom, and the fellow not drunk for a wonder!" exclaimed Derrick. "Where's the horse, man?"

"In this next booth, Sir," returned the driver. "I will put him to in no time.—I am afraid your honours have not won."

"See, Walter, lad," cried Derrick in remonstrance; "that's your fault. Don't hang out such signals of distress that everybody who meets us offers their confounded pity. Be a man, lad; be a man. Besides, what did that gipsy girl say just now? Many a wise word is spoken in jest. She said, with your good looks, that you must needs be lucky with the women. I should like to see the heiress who would say 'No' to Captain Walter Lisgard. A good marriage would mend all this, and—"

"Go to the devil!" exclaimed the young man passionately.

"You are out of temper, lad," returned the other gravely; "but don't say those sort of things to me, for I have not deserved them."

"Not deserved them! you have been my ruin, curse you!" continued the other with vehemence. "But for you, you drunken—"

"Take you care, Walter Lisgard!" roared the bearded man in a voice of thunder. "Do not make me strike you, for I would as soon strike my son. How can all this be my fault? Do you suppose that I have not lost

also — almost all I have in the world save a few hundreds?"

"Ay, mine, I suppose," exclaimed Walter bitterly. "I know I owe you a thousand pounds."

"Yes," returned the other, producing his pocket-book, "here are three I.O.U.s bearing your signature, for two, three, and five hundred pounds."

"You shall be paid, Sir, never fear," rejoined the young man insolently. "No man but you, however, would have produced them at such a time. But it serves me right for herding with such people."

"Thank you, young man. At the same time, few of your fine gentlemen would treat them this way." Thus saying, he tore them into little strips, and scattered them to the wind.—"All I ask, by way of repayment, now is, that you will listen to a few words I have to say. I have loved you, Walter Lisgard, in spite of yourself, and would have laid down my life for yours. I have concealed from my own heart as well as I could the selfish baseness that underlies your every act—but that is over now. Look you, on the coasts where I have come from, there is many a bay which, if you saw it at high tide, you would say: 'What a beautiful harbour! what smooth and smiling water! This is a place for all men to cast anchor.' But when the tide is going out, you see how you have been deceived. Here is a reef that would wreck a navy; here is a jagged and cruel rock, and there another and another. With every one, you say to yourself, surely this is the last. But for this and for that, there was never a better anchorage; and how beautiful the place is! What luxuriant foliage—what exquisite verdure fringes the shore—just the shores, you know. But when the tide is quite out it is impossible to like the place any longer. There are nothing *but* reefs and rocks to be seen then, and a few loathsome reptiles among the slime. Now, Walter Lisgard, I have come upon you at dead low-water, and I don't wish to meet you any more. You will deceive others, of course, who

may see you at the flow, but you will never deceive me. I shall go down to Mirk, after a little, to bring away my wife. Take my advice, and don't be there. Above all things, see that your mother does not cross me in that matter, or it will be worse for all concerned. I have nobody now in the world who cares for me save Mary Forest, and they shall not rob me of her. Here is the hansom in which we can no longer sit together. You are not used to walking, being what is called a gentleman, so you had better take it. All I ask you is, to leave our lodgings before I reach them, since you will arrive there first ; or if not—I will take myself off elsewhere ; I should be sorry to be under the same roof with you again, young man."

Then pulling his hat forward upon his brow, in place of farewell, Ralph Derrick turned his back upon Walter Lisgard, and took his way to town on foot. As the captain, sitting alone in no very enviable frame of mind, passed him afterwards upon the road, he could not help remarking to himself how old and bowed the insolent fellow looked.





CHAPTER XXII.

MISS AYNTON'S THUMB IS TURNED BACK.

“**S**UPPOSE, Mary, that I shall be sure of getting a letter from Mr. Arthur to-day?” observed my lady to her maid, as that confidential domestic was proceeding with the duties—which were by no means mysteries—of her toilet, upon the morning after the picnic at Belcomb. “He is certain to reply concerning a matter which was important enough to cause the use of the telegraph.”

“I suppose so, my lady: very like.”

Nothing could be more in contrast than the tones in which these two persons had spoken; the question had been earnest, almost fervent, and one which evidently was put in order to evoke an affirmative answer; the reply was given carelessly enough, or rather as though the thoughts of her who uttered it were absent from the matter altogether.

“‘*Very likely*,’ Mary! Why, how can it be otherwise? Just run down and open the letter-bag; you know where to find the key.”

“Yes, my lady.”

As Mary Forest left the room, she cast at her beloved mistress, whose eyes were fixed thoughtfully upon the pattern of the carpet, and observed her not, a look of unspeakable love and pity; and when the door was shut between them, she burst into a passion of silent tears.

"It will kill her," murmured she; "she can never survive this second trouble. Sorrow and shame, sorrow and shame, are all that fall to my dear mistress now. *How* shall I tell her? May Heaven give her strength to bear it; but I wish, for her sake, that she was dead, and already the angel she deserves to be— Ah, you minx!" ejaculated Mary, interrupting herself as she passed Miss Aynton's room, and shaking her plump fist at its unconscious tenant; "you'll go to quite another place, and serve you right too." And seemingly comforted by this reflection, she wiped her eyes with the hem of her apron, and hurried down the back-stairs upon her errand.

"What will Arthur think?" mused my lady, as she awaited her maid's return with a beating heart. "He will certainly connect the request to destroy that letter with what I said to him at the Watersmeet a while ago, about"—she did not utter the concluding words at all, but only formed them with her lips—"poor Ralph. If Arthur suspects, it will be with him the first step to knowledge; and yet he would never use it to my hurt. If there were anything amiss in the concealment of this matter, then I should fear him, for he is the soul of honour. But my bastard son—God help him, if he ever comes to know it—robs nobody even of this barren title, and my children's money is due to no one else. They might have been paupers as well as bastards; let their mother comfort herself with that thought all she can." My lady's lips were crooked into a bitter smile: hers was not a cynical face—far from it—and such an expression misbecame it sadly; it looked more like a contortion of the mouth induced by bodily pain.—"Well, Mary, is there no letter from Mr. Arthur?"

"No, Ma'am; none."

"Then there is one more cause for anxiety added to the rest of my troubles, that is all. Ah me, how foolishly I used to fret myself in days when there was no cause! Perhaps he never got the telegram, and not understand-

ing why the letter came to him, has transmitted it back to—to the person to whom it was addressed.—Mary, you had better presently run over to the *Lisgord Arms*, and see to that. Steve will give it up, if you explain to him that it is your handwriting. Tell him, if necessary, that I promise him he shall not lose the inn. I must have that letter. Mr. Arthur could not possibly know the London address of—of that person, could he?"

"Very likely, my lady, yes—at least, I don't know."

"Mary!"

"I beg your pardon, Madam," replied the waiting-maid, starting like one aroused from a dream. "I was not thinking what I said; I was thinking of something else."

"I think you might give me your attention, Mary," returned my lady sighing: "you cannot be thinking of anything so momentous as this matter, which involves sorrow, shame, and perchance utter ruin."

"Alas! but I can, my lady," answered the other gravely; "and I am doing it. There has something happened worse than anything you can guess at. Master Walter—"

"Great Heaven! has any accident happened to my boy? I saw him but an hour ago; he came into my room, dear fellow, to bid me good-bye before he started for the station. The young horse was in the dog-cart—Oh Mary, Mary, do not—do not tell me that my Walter is killed!"

"He is quite well, my lady, so far as I know—quite well in health."

"Thank Heaven for that! Bless you for that, Mary! Why did you frighten me so, if there is nothing the matter?"

"There is something the matter, my lady. Pray command yourself; you will have need of all your fortitude. I would never tell it you—burdened as you are already—only you must know it; *you*, above all, and no one else, if we can help it."

"More secrets ! more deception, Mary ! Spare me, if you can, dear friend ; I am sorely tried already."

"I cannot spare you, my lady, or I would do so, Heaven knows ; nay, I would almost take the shame upon my own shoulders, if that might shield you from the sorrow it must needs bring with it. Miss Letty——"

"It is not fit that Shame and my daughter should be mentioned in the same breath," replied my lady, rising, and speaking with dignity. "Do not continue ; I forbid you to speak. What you were going to say is false, and I will not listen."

"It is true, my lady—true as that the sun is shining now. Of course, Miss Letty has nothing to do with it ; but it was through her I learned it."

"Does she *know* it, then ?" asked my lady sternly.

"Certainly not, Madam ; and Heaven grant she never may. She's as pure-minded as any seraph, and, like Charity, thinketh no evil. But she told me this afternoon—seeing that you were troubled, and not liking to pain you, perhaps without reason, and speaking to me as her old nurse and friend, who loves all the Lisgards, good and bad (for they are not all good, alas, alas !), and who will love them to the end—she told me that something which she had overheard between Miss Rose and Master Walter——"

"You mean Sir Richard," interposed my lady.

"No, Madam—his brother. It was Master Walter that I was speaking of the other day in the carriage, and whom I understood your ladyship to say that Miss Aynton had refused. I knew very well that they were love-making, flirting and such like upon the sly ; but I did not know—I could not suspect—— Oh ! mistress dear, a terrible disgrace has befallen you, through that infamous young hussy, Miss Rose Aynton—though what Master Walter could have seen in the jade, I am sure passes my comprehension altogether."

"Disgrace ! Walter ! Rose Aynton ! What do you mean, woman ?" asked my lady angrily. "You must

be mad, to say such things. I heard Sir Richard ask the girl to be his wife with my own ears, and she refused him."

"Did she, my lady? Well, I'm surprised at that, for I should have thought she would have stuck at *nothing*.—But let me tell the whole story. What Miss Letty heard at the picnic was this: she heard Master Walter cursing Miss Rose. That was an odd thing for a young gentleman to do to a young lady—although, for that matter, I have no doubt she *deserved* it—was it not? Well, that was what Miss Letty thought. She had never heard such words before, and could scarcely force her innocent lips to repeat them; but I made her do it. And certainly Master Walter expressed himself pretty strong. It seems he was angered about the young woman's behaviour to his brother yesterday——"

"Aye," interrupted my lady, quietly, and still thinking that the prejudice of her waiting-maid had much exaggerated matters, "that was partly my fault; I begged Miss Aynton to be more complaisant in her manner to Sir Richard."

"Well, Master Walter might have been annoyed, Madam, but what right had he to be *jealous*? and especially what relation could exist between him and Miss Rose, which justified him in using such dreadful words? Fancy *swearing* at her, my lady!"

"Yes, that is shocking indeed, Mary. Miss Letty, however, must certainly have misunderstood him."

"That's what I told her, my lady, in hopes to quiet her a bit; but I did not believe it myself, no more than you do. We don't suppose that Miss Letty invented the oaths, do we?"

"That is true," sighed Lady Lisgard. "It makes me very wretched to think that my boy Walter should have so far forgotten himself as to use such language to a young girl—a guest, too, in his mother's house. I shall certainly demand an explanation of it from his own lips."

"Alas, there is no need, Madam," returned the waiting-maid. "I can tell you all—if you can bear to listen to it."

"I am listening," said my lady, wearily; but she sat with her back towards Mistress Forest, and once, in the course of her recital, she uttered a piteous moan, and covered her face with her hands.

"When Miss Letty told me what I have just said, my lady, and had parted from me a little comforted, trying to persuade herself that she really might have been mistaken in what she had overheard, I instantly sought out Anne Rees, and bade her come with me to my room. You wouldn't have believed it in a girl as you yourself chose out of the village school, and who has been at the Abbey under my own eye for four years; but she refused point-blank: very respectful, I must say, but also very firm. 'I dursn't do it,' said she, all of a twitter—'not till Miss Rose is abed and asleep; or if I do, you may be certain sure as she will come to know it, and get out of me every word that may pass between us two.'

"The girl looked as scared as though she had seen a ghost, and yet my request did not seem to come on her at all unexpected; and, in point of fact, she knew what she was wanted for well enough. However, I thought it best to let her have her way; and so it was arranged that she was to come to my room as soon as she had done with the young ladies—although 'tis little enough, indeed, she has done for Miss Letty of late weeks, but all for that spiteful little hussy, Miss Rose.

"Now," said I, when I got her alone, "Anne Rees, there is nobody to listen to what we say, and you may speak to me as to your own mother."

"Ah, Mistress Forest," answered she, beginning to whimper, "I only wish I dared."

"This young lady has got you under her thumb, I see, Anne. Now, if you'll tell me the whole truth of what is going on between her and Master Walter, I promise you that I'll turn her thumb *back*. It will hurt

her a little—and that you won't be sorry for, perhaps—and it will set you *free*.'

"Oh, Mistress Forest, if you could only do *that*, I would be a good girl all my life, and never try on other people's clothes again, nor be a spy upon my lady, and—" Here she stopped quite short, and looked as though she would have bitten her tongue off.

"Now, Anne," said I, "you *must* tell me, whether you will or not: for you have gone too far to turn back. How did Miss Rose Aynton make a slave of a well-conducted girl like you—with nothing but vanity, that I know of, to be said against you—and compel you to do all this dirty work for her?"

"Well, Mistress Forest, as you truly say, I was always a vain child; and Heaven has punished me pretty sharp for it. One day, when the young ladies were out, and I was in Miss Aynton's room a-setting it to rights, what should I come upon—where, perhaps, I had no right to look for it, for it was evidently meant to be hidden—but a queer-shaped leather-box with trinkets in it."

"A jewel-case, I suppose you mean, Anne."

"Yes, Ma'am; but they were none of those as Miss Aynton was in the habit of wearing—nor had she that box when she first came: she must have brought it down with her after she went back to London for a week in the early part of the year. However, all as struck me then was the beauty of the jewels; and I thought there was no harm in my just trying them on in the front of the swing mirror. My ears not being pierced, I couldn't fix the earrings, although I wouldn't a-minded a little pain, and they sparked like morning dew; but I clasped on the pearl necklace and the bracelets, and stood admiring myself in the looking-glass a good long time. Then all of a sudden I saw an angry face looking over my shoulder, and heard a cruel voice whisper: "Thief, thief!" just like the hiss of a wood-snake. I scarcely recognised Miss Rose, who had always looked so pleasant, and been such a smooth-spoken young lady."

“ ‘I could send you to prison, Anne Rees, for this,’ continued she, very grave and slow; “and I *will*, too, if you don’t do everything I tell you. I hate a thief.”

“ ‘Lor, Miss,’ cried I, “have mercy, for Heaven’s sake! I never meant to thieve nothing.”

“ ‘And I hate a liar,’ added she, looking so cold and cruel that she made me shudder. “ You break open my drawer—not a word, you bad girl, or I’ll send to Dalwynch for a policeman—and I actually find my property on your very person! You ought to go to jail for this; and perhaps I am wrong not to send you there. However, remember: from this moment, you are *my* servant—only mine; and whatever I tell you to do, whether it is against your late mistress or not, see that you do it; and dare not to breathe one word of anything that I do, or speak, or possess—such as these jewels, for instance—or you will rue it bitterly, Anne Rees.”

“ ‘Of course I promised, Mistress Forest, for I was in such a state of terror that I would have promised anything; but you cannot imagine to what a slavery I bound myself!’

“ ‘I know all about that, Anne,’ said I: ‘everybody knows you’re becoming a spy and a sneak. But there is no occasion for you to follow such vocations any longer. My lady would never believe a word of your intending to steal those things: I can promise you her protection; so make your mind quite easy upon that point.—But now, what about Master Walter?’

“ ‘Well, Mistress Forest, the jewels were his present, to begin with. There have been very wicked goings on. It was quite dreadful to see her kiss dear good Miss Letty at night, and return her “God bless you!” so pious like, when she was not blessing her—I mean Miss Rose—at all. Oh, Mistress Forest, I have known all this for weeks and weeks, and dared not speak one word; and now the truth is almost too terrible to tell.’”

“ And then, my lady,” pursued Mistress Forest, “she told me things which it is not necessary to repeat to you.

I knew she was telling truth ; but in order to assure myself that it was so, I crept out with naked feet, and listened at Miss Aynton's door, and I heard *two voices* ——”

“ Did you *recognise* them, woman ; are you sure of that ? ” asked my lady, sternly.

“ Ah, yes, Madam—there is no doubt.”

“ Heaven help us, and forgive us ! ” murmured my lady, with bowed head. “ Ah, Walter, Walter, I had expected shame, but not from deed of yours ! Where is this —Miss Aynton, Mary ? ”

“ At her breakfast, my lady ; and doubtless making an exceedingly good one. *She* is not one to let her conscience interfere with her appetite, bless you ! Like the murderer under sentence in Dalwynch jail, as I read of in the paper yesterday, she ‘takes her meals with regularity,’ I warrant ; and does not in any way physically deteriorate under the distressing circumstances of her situation.”

“ Send her to me, Mary—in the boudoir yonder,” said my lady, gravely. “ Tell her I desire to speak with her very particularly. Breakfast ? No, alas ! I feel as though a morsel of food would choke me. Send her hither at once.”





CHAPTER XXIII.

THRUST AND COUNTER-THRUST.

CANNOT, for my own part, at all agree with the depreciatory expressions used by Mistress Forest with respect to Miss Rose Aynton's personal appearance. "What Master Walter could have seen in her," &c., it was easy enough for anybody else to see who was not of her own sex. A magnificent figure, masses of silken hair that, when unbound, would ripple almost to her dainty feet, and a countenance "bright as light, and clear as wind;" and indeed this latter was too keen and sharply cut for my taste. The sort of expression which one likes to see in one's lawyer, does not so well become the object of our heart's affections. Of course, there was nothing of steel about Miss Rose, except what might have been in her crinoline; but I never saw man or woman who gave me so much the idea of being armed *cap-à-pie*, she seemed to be equipped in a complete Milan suit of proof, impregnable, invulnerable. Like *Le Noir Fainéant* in *Ivanhoe*, she never attacked anybody, although my lady fancied she had recently detected signs of aggression about her; and those who knew her best avoided putting the temptation in her way. But when she entered her hostess's boudoir by invitation, upon that particular morning, she looked not only, as usual, on her guard; there was also a certain slumbrous fire in her dark eyes, which betokened on-

slaught—the initiative of battle. My lady herself remarked it, not without pity. “How little is this poor lost creature aware,” thought she, “that I know all.”

But she was quite wrong in this. Miss Rose had almost gathered the truth from the trembling fingers and frightened manner of her tiring-maid that morning; and the thing had been quite confirmed to her by the malicious triumph with which Mary Forest had delivered her mistress’s request to see her in the boudoir upon very particular business.

“Will you please to sit down, Miss Aynton?”

Yes, it was so. The secret was out. Not even a morning salutation from her friend and hostess; and the hand only outstretched to point her out a chair at the other extremity of the room.

“Before proceeding with what I have to say,” began my lady, “I wish to know whether your aunt is in town.”

“I believe so, Lady Lisgard; I think she has come back from Leamington—although I have not heard from her for the last two days.”

“That is well. When I hinted, yesterday morning, that it would be better for you to return to London, I was unaware of the *necessity* for your departure from this roof at once—*immediately*—and for ever.”

‘Indeed!’

Not a muscle moved: confident in the goodness, if not of her cause, at least of her Milan suit; conscious, too, of the possession of a Damascus poinard, undreamed of by the foe, and admirable for close encounters, her right hand nervously opened and shut as though to clutch the handle—that was all.

“You have disgraced this house and me: yourself and your sex.”

“You lie, insolent woman,” returned the other; “*and judge others by yourself.*”

Each started to her feet, and looked her enemy in the face as she slung these words of flame.

"It is worse than useless, girl, thus to brazen it out," continued my lady, attaching no importance to the emphasis the other laid upon her last words. "Outraging not only moral laws, but even the rites of hospitality, you have intrigued with my own son under my own roof."

"You dare to say so, Lady Lisgard, do you? It is only for his sake, I swear, that I do not brand *you* wanton, for that calumny. I *could* do it; you know I could, although you wear that look of wonder. Was not that man Derrick once your lover? Ah! you wince at that. Sir Robert—good, easy man—he knew nothing, of course——"

Here she stopped, for my lady's face was terrible to look upon.

"Be silent, bad, bold girl! You shoot your poisoned arrows at a venture, and aim nothing home. You know not what a wife should be—how should you? *You!*"

It is not true that the swan is "born to be the only graceful shape of Scorn." A fair woman unjustly slandered is its rival therein. Rose Aynton cowered before that keen contempt—beneath the dropping of those bitter words—as though they were sword and fire.

"I will never forgive you this, Lady Lisgard," muttered she—"never, never!"

"*You!* *you* forgive! To such as you, it would be idle to protest my soul is spotless. The man whose name you have soiled by uttering it—my husband—he, in high heaven, knows right well that never so much as thought of mine has wronged him. Vile, evil-minded girl, as false as frail!"

"That is sufficient, Madam; almost enough, even if I were indeed the thing you take me for." Here the girl paused to moisten her dry lips, and catch her breath, of which passion had almost deprived her. "Now, look you, I was wrong. I thought my lady was not so lily-pure as the world took her to be, and I was wrong. I have seen things with my own eyes, and through the eyes

of others, that might well entitle me to say: ‘I still believe it.’ I tell you, Lady Lisgard, I have *proofs*—or what seemed to me to be so, a few minutes back—of the charge that has so moved you, such as would amply justify my disbelief in your denial. But I honestly avow that I was wrong.”

“I thank you, Miss Rose Aynton, for your charity.”

“Spare your scorn, Madam. It is no charity that moves me; nay, far from it. Convinced almost against my will, I own, by your unsupported assertion—your mere ‘No,’ I have withdrawn an accusation for which I have been patiently preparing evidence this long time—not, indeed, for your hurt, but for my own safety and convenience, and hereby confess it baseless and unjust. Now, on your part, I do beseech you, make amends to *me*. You, too, have had your seeming proofs of my disgrace; you, too, have heard and seen yourself, or through the eyes and ears of others, certain——”

“Add not, lost, wretched girl,” interposed my lady, “deceit to sin! All that is left you is to pray to Heaven for pardon, and to leave that hospitable roof which you have disgraced.”

Rose Aynton’s gipsy face grew drawn and pale. She had aimed her blow, and missed; the weapon in which she had put so much trust had proved utterly good for nothing. All her schemes of the last few months were rendered fruitless, and the discoveries to which she had attached such vast importance, and which she had attained to by such mean arts, shown to be vain and futile.

And now that she had humiliated herself by owning this, and thrown herself at this woman’s feet, she would not extend so much as a finger-tip to help her.

“Lady Lisgard, as I hope for heaven,” cried she in anguish, “I am innocent of that with which you charge me; I am honest as yourself, or Letty. Alas, you shudder, because I dare to compare myself with your pure daughter; you think that I soil that name, too, by uttering it. What

shall I say—by what shall I swear, in order to make you believe me?"

"I would to Heaven I *could* believe you, Rose," returned my lady sadly, touched in spite of herself by the girl's yearning appeal. "If you could erase this damning blot upon my son's fair name, and give me back my Walter—as I deemed him but an hour ago—I would be so grateful, girl, that you should almost think I loved you."

"You *would!*" cried Rose with eagerness; then added bitterly: "But no; you mean if I could say: 'Your son has never pressed his lips to these, has never sworn to be mine, and mine alone.' But you would not thank me for merely proving that in this, although he did it, he was not to blame."

"What! not to blame?"

"No, Madam—for even for *his* sake, I cannot longer bear this burden of undeserved shame. *Walter Lisgard is my husband.* We were married weeks ago, when I went to London in the spring."

"Married, married!" gasped my lady. "Thank God for that! Far better to deceive *me*, boy, than this poor girl. I never thought to say: 'I am glad you are my daughter-in-law, Rose Aynton; but I do say so now.' She took both her hands in hers, and gazed upon her downcast face, now overspread with blushes, and tinged for once with genuine tenderness. "It moves you, does it, that I am thankful to see the honour of my son preserved at some sacrifice of his prospects. How little do you know me, girl! yet I am glad to move you anyway. Rose, be a kind wife to him. I will not blame you for what has happened, although I have much cause. I must blame *him* rather. Who can wonder that you yielded when he said: 'Be mine.' So gentle and so loving as he can be! Now, too, I see it all. When you refused Sir Richard in the library, you were actually his brother's wife. Ah, Heaven, you must not remain here longer—not a day. I shall write to Walter——"

"Nay, Madam—*mother*," exclaimed Rose beseechingly, "I pray you let *me* write. I have broken my plighted word, and disobeyed my husband's bidding in revealing this. To please him, I had resolved to defend myself this morning as I best might, by returning thrust for thrust, without using this shield—my innocence—at all. But your bitter words—a shower of barbed darts—drove me behind it. He will be very wrath with me indeed, Madam; but far worse if the news comes from you. He has much just now to make him anxious too."

"Indeed," replied my lady hastily. "How is it, then, that I have heard nothing of it? But I forgot; it is *you* who have his secrets now. Yes, you shall write, not I. Tell him that I am sorry—sorry that he should have deceived me above all; but that I forgive him freely. He knows that, however, right well. He must not come back to Mirk until he hears from me; and you, Rose, you must join him without delay. Every member of this household must learn at once that *you* are Walter's wife; but not till you have gone—for Richard's sake."

My lady's thoughts, as always, were for others; even when this great blow had well-nigh stunned her, she did not permit herself the luxury of selfish grief. She was already busy with schemes for the benefit of her erring boy; how to contrive and where to save without prejudice to Sir Richard's interests (for *that* must be now avoided above everything) so that a respectable allowance might be meted out to the young couple. She could not respect, and far less love the girl who had become her Walter's wife in so clandestine a manner; but still she *was* his wife, and therefore in her eyes, a something precious. Then, bad as matters were, they might have been far worse; she had fully expected that they were so; and she felt in some sort grateful to accept this product of rashness and deceit in place of downright shame. Moreover, she foresaw in her own mind, for ever dwelling on such contingencies, that out of this evil a certain good might come, in case of that terrible mis-

fortune befalling her, compared with which this present sorrow was as the prick of a pin's point.

Rose, upon her part, had certainly cause for congratulation upon the result of this interview. Although her weapon of offence had failed her—and she was genuinely convinced of the groundlessness of her late suspicions concerning Lady Lisgard—she had found in her mother-in-law a most generous adversary, and one certainly far more forgiving than she deserved. Even the worst of us, I conclude, are not bad at all times, and when my lady, as they parted, touched her brow with her pale lips, and murmured once more : “Be a kind wife to him, Rose,” that young woman mustered an honest tear or two—of which articles, to do her justice, she did not keep, like some women, a constant supply on hand for social emergencies.

Not until she regained her own room did she begin to think that she had been unnecessarily humble, and had weakly suffered herself to be moved by the show of forgiveness and good-will which my lady had doubtless put on for her own purposes. However, the confession had been made, and upon the whole, most satisfactorily got over, the thought of which had oppressed her of late more than she cared to own, and made her bitter against her mother-in law, as people generally feel towards those whom they are conscious of having wronged. And now there was that letter to write to Walter, which we have seen him peruse with such disfavour at his hotel in town, acquainting him with her premature avowal of their common secret ; and many a line of dexterous excuse she wove, and many a line of affectionate pleading, only to be torn up and recomposed again and again ; for there was one person in the world beside herself whom Rose loved dearly, and yet of whom she stood in deepest awe ; and he whom she both loved and feared with all the strength of her energetic nature, was her husband—Walter Lisgard.



CHAPTER XXIV.

NO LETTERS.

ON the morning after the interview between Rose and Lady Lisgard, the latter again sent down Mistress Forest for the post-bag, and was once more disappointed at receiving no news from Arthur Haldane ; not only did the interval of twenty-four hours make this matter additionally serious, and increase her former apprehensions that he had not received her telegram, and might find some means of forwarding Derrick's letter to himself—since it had certainly not come back to the *Lisgard Arms* ; but there was a still graver cause for anxiety in the fact that Mary Forest also received no reply from Ralph to that rejection so decidedly yet courteously composed by her mistress, with the view of taking away all hope, and at the same time of leaving as little sting of anger as was possible. Lady Lisgard would have almost preferred to have received from this man a declaration of open warfare—an expressed resolution of carrying away Mary as his wife, in spite of all obstacles—rather than this menacing No Answer. Contemptuous silence was not at all the natural line for one of his violent character to take, if he had decided to treat her waiting-woman's letter as final. He was more likely in that case to have penned a tornado of invective, and bidden both mistress and maid to have gone to the devil. It seemed only too probable, then,

that he was determined—as he had threatened—to take no denial; and that he would return in person, sooner or later, to Mirk, to prosecute his suit.

My lady made certain preparations for that extremity—nay, for the worst that could possibly arise—chief among which was the composition of a very long and carefully-conned epistle to her eldest son, that she put by in her desk undated and unsealed, so that additions could be made to it at pleasure. Then she waited in agonies of suspense day after day; and yet no letter came for her maid from Ralph, or for herself from Arthur Haldane. Moreover, although, in her absorbing anxiety about the more serious subject, this affected my lady far less than it did Rose, no communication came from Walter in answer to her long and justificatory letter, acquainting him with the disclosure of their marriage. Our readers are aware that this last circumstance was simply due to the fact, that it was reposing in the “address-box” of the *Turf Hotel*, until such time as it caught the eye of the overworked waiter, and was carried over with apologies to Walter’s lodgings, whither he had given orders that anything addressed to him should be conveyed forthwith. But he had not particularly expected a letter from that quarter—or, at all events, felt very anxious to get it—for nobody but Rose would have written to him to the *Turf Hotel*, all others at Mirk and elsewhere believing him to be at Canterbury with his regiment, whence all communications were forwarded to him to his London lodgings. Thus, from the very deceit to which she had lent herself—to her peculiar information as to his movements—was this failure of Rose’s letter to reach her husband owing. During this protracted interval, she suffered agonies of suspense, of mortification, and even of fear. It was wormwood to have to say to her mother-in-law every morning: “He has not written yet,” and thereby to confess that Walter treated with indifference the embarrassing position in which she was now placed at Mirk Abbey; moreover, she surmised that her husband was

too much enraged with her disobedience in betraying their secret, to write at all.

His wife knew—although few others did—that Master Walter was capable of being “put out” to a very considerable extent. His very marriage with herself—although she fortunately did not know *that*—had been mainly owing to his impatience of opposition, and pique against his elder brother. Doubtless propinquity and opportunities of flirtation with a beautiful and accomplished girl, not by any means lavish of her smiles, but whose devotion to himself had been almost that of a slave for her master, had carried the handsome captain towards the gulf of matrimony ; but it was the desire to thwart Sir Richard—who, his jealous eye perceived, was falling seriously in love with Rose long before *s/he* saw it—which was the final cause of his rash act. He eagerly snatched at an occasion at once of self-gratification, and of humiliating his proud and arrogant brother. He was delighted to let him know that neither his wealth nor his title could weigh in the balance of a woman’s favour against the gifts and graces which it was his habit to deprecate or ignore. We have said that he discovered Sir Richard’s passion even before the object of it; but Rose’s subtle brain was already preoccupied with himself. To give that scheming beauty her due, I think that even had she not been already Walter’s wife, she would not have exchanged him for the baronet, at the period when he made her that dazzling offer in the library. She felt that she had let slip a splendid prize, and was proportionally angry with Sir Richard, whose backwardness and hauteur had prevented her from recognising the possibility of its falling to her lot ; but the feeling of disappointment was but transient ; she was a bride of only a few weeks, and to get disenchanted of one like Walter Lisgard is a long process even for a wife. By this time, however, though she idolised him, still Rose had learned to fear him ; and absolutely dared not pen another letter to inquire the reason of his silence,

Of those who waited, sick at heart, for the coming of the postman every morning, Lady Lisgard, therefore, was the first to lose patience. She wrote to Arthur Haldane a few urgent lines, requesting his immediate presence at Mirk “upon private and particular business ;” and within an hour of their receipt he took the train, and appeared in person at the Abbey. My lady had decided to consult him, in preference to his father, respecting the arrangements necessary to be made for the future maintenance of Walter and his wife, since it would be very unwise to make so much importance of the matter concerning Derrick, about which she was in reality vastly more concerned, and burned to know the truth.

“What is the matter, *ma mère?*” inquired he tenderly, when, not without the exercise of some address—for Sir Richard was always hospitable, and (especially in the absence of his brother) both gracious and attentive to all guests—Arthur and my lady had managed to get an hour to themselves in the boudoir. “You look very pale and anxious.”

“Yes, Arthur, I have enough to make me so. Walter has secretly made Rose Aynton his wife. Ah ! you pity me, I see, and perhaps him also. Do not condole with me, however. I have sent for you hither to help me to make the best—— Alas, alas, you would not have believed it of my Walter, would you ?” And my lady, touched by the sympathising look and manner of the honest young fellow, burst into the first “good cry” which she had permitted to herself since the calamity had been discovered; for when confiding the circumstance to Letty, it had been her duty to bear up, and when alone, a still more serious anxiety consumed her. Even now, her emotion, though violent, was soon over, and the indulgence in it seemed to have done her good. “Pardon me, Arthur,” said she, with one of her old smiles ; “I won’t be foolish any more.” And then, after narrating matters with which we are acquainted, she laid before him, as concisely as she could, what funds at her

own disposal could be made available to form an income for the young couple, in addition to the interest which Walter's fortune of five thousand pounds or so, into the possession of which he would come in some eighteen months, would yield. She little knew that on that very night—for it was the eve of the Derby Day—the unworthy boy, for whom she was making such sacrifices, was about to risk and lose more than a third of his patrimony, and that upon the next day the remainder was doomed to go, and much more with it.

"But this will pinch you, *ma mère*," reasoned Arthur kindly, "and narrow your own already somewhat scanty revenue sadly. Sir Richard will come into a very fine rent-roll in June, beside thousands—"

"But can we ask him to help Walter and *his wife*? And could Walter take it, even if his brother were generous enough to offer it?"

"Sir Richard is quite capable of such magnanimity, *ma mère*, unless I am much mistaken in his character. He would not like to see his brother—even were he but a Lisgard, let alone his so near kith and kin—in a position that would be discreditable to the family; while if one has really loved a woman, one surely does not wish to see her poor and struggling, simply because she has preferred some one else. As for Walter's accepting the help which his brother can so well spare—it may be a little bitter—but, in my opinion, that would be far preferable to receiving what would impoverish his mother. The arrangements you propose would leave you but three hundred pounds a year."

"Yes," answered my lady hastily, "I require that for a purpose, else half the sum would easily suffice my present needs."

"It would do nothing of the sort, *ma mère*. Come, let us be reasonable. If you will leave this matter in my hands, I will endeavour to be the mediator between your sons. Sir Richard has an honest regard for me, I think, and Walter also, when he is himself."

"Poor Walter!" murmured my lady, sighing.

"Yes, he is to be pitied," answered the other drily; "but also, between ourselves — although I shall endeavour, after my lawyer instincts, to make it appear otherwise to his brother—to be somewhat blamed, *ma mère*. Since, then, I am prepared, under the cloak of arbitrator, to be the partisan of your darling—— Yes, they are both your darlings, Lady Lisgard, I know, but with a difference."

"Walter is in trouble," urged my lady pitifully.

"Yes, that is the reason, of course. However, will you put the case unreservedly in my own hands? for if so, although it is not an easy task, I will do my best to make your sons shake hands."

"There is none like you, Arthur, none. Heaven bless you and reward you!"

"There may be none like me, *ma mère*, but there are also, I hope, many people a great deal better. And now that we have done with this matter for the present, may I ask, Why letters are directed to another person, under care to me, which I am at the same time directed by telegram to put behind the fire?"

"Oh, you got that telegram, did you?" said my lady quietly. "Mary Forest entreated me so to send it. The fact was, she accepted that person by letter—what was his name?—of whom we spoke together some time ago at the Watersmeet; but afterwards, persuaded by me (acting in accordance with your suggestion, you remember), she decided to refuse him. But the first letter was unfortunately posted before the second was written; and the postmistress at Dalwynch positively refused to give it up, although I drove over there myself to request it."

"Well, upon my life, *ma mère*, but you're a bold woman," exclaimed the young lawyer, laughing. "Why, of course, she wouldn't give it up. She would be stealing the property of the Postmaster-general if she had done so, and you would be the receiver with the guiltiest knowledge."

"Well, at all events, she did not," pursued my lady simply. "She would do nothing beyond directing the envelope afresh to your address."

"Honest creature!" interrupted Arthur grimly.

"Under these circumstances, I telegraphed to you, knowing that you would be good enough to destroy the letter directly it reached you."

"Yes, *ma mère*, and I did so," returned Arthur gravely; "but I feared it was not right, and now that you have told me this, I know that it was wrong. You may have had your reasons, dear Lady Lisgard, and doubtless very urgent ones, to wish the destruction of those letters."

"Those letters!" exclaimed my lady.

"Yes, I am certain, of course, that you intended no harm to anyone, and that what you did was in ignorance of the law; but so suspicious was I of your having transgressed it—and at the same time, perhaps, a little annoyed that you should have chosen *me*, Lady Lisgard, for your instrument in such a matter—that I purposely omitted to communicate with you, to put in writing any evidence whatsoever of that transaction."

"Yes, yes," said my lady hastily, and taking no notice of the young man's evident annoyance. "But you speak of *letters*. There was only *one* letter directed to Pump Court."

"There were two, Lady Lisgard, and both addressed in the same handwriting. The words, *Turf Hotel, Piccadilly*, were crossed out also, in each case, I remember, in red ink. It was the postmistress who did it, I have no doubt. If you led her to imagine that that was the wrong address in the one instance, she naturally imagined it to be so in the other, and probably made the alteration in all good faith."

"Great Heaven, and so it must have been!" exclaimed my lady, clasping her hands. "Oh Arthur, this mischance—if my misconduct does indeed deserve punishment, has brought, I fear, a very harsh and bitter one—that is on Mary. The second letter should have

reached the person to whom it was addressed without fail. He will now have heard nothing—this Derrick ; and he will take the woman's silence for consent. Oh Arthur, Arthur, you little know what bad news this is."

"I can see, *ma mère*, that it vexes you," answered the young man kindly ; "and that is evil enough for me to know. Some sorrows are best kept to one's self, I think. Now, look you, this Mr. Derrick will certainly, being a sporting-man, be in town to-morrow night. He will not have left his hotel before the Derby is over. Now, I will go and seek him out to-morrow with the letter in my hand that Mary shall re-write. We have only but a very little time, remember."

"Dear Artliur, counsellor, and friend, and son in one, what comfort do you not give me in all straits !" She rose and offered him her pale but comely cheek, which the young man touched with reverent lips ; then holding her hand in his, he said in a firm voice : "And now, *ma mère*, even that is not fee enough for such an avaricious lawyer as I am. I have promised myself a talk with Letty."

"Do so, and Heaven bless you, my dear boy—ay, bless you both," continued my lady, when he had left the room, "for you would take her for your wife even though you knew what I know of her unhappy birth. I have almost a mind to tell him ; but then, with his stern notions of what is right—although, Heaven knows, I wrong no one by this reticence—he might—— 'Some sorrows are best kept to one's self, I think,' said he. And whether he suspects something amiss, and meant the words for my particular ear or not, it is sound advice. Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof. If I were always to be thinking of the morrow, I should soon go mad."



CHAPTER XXV

MR. ARTHUR HALDANE MAKES HIMSELF USEFUL.

SOME writers are very fond of describing interviews between betrothed persons, and there are undoubtedly readers who take a pleasure in reading such delicate details ; and yet it seems strange that this should be so, with respect to the mere description of what in real life is undoubtedly tame and stupid to the looker-on ; for what can be duller, or more uninteresting, except to one another, than “an engaged couple ?” With what meaningless emphasis they smile ! what mysterious secrets (known to every adult in the company) they interchange ; and how they go blindly feeling after one another’s hands under the table, whenever the opportunity offers. I think it even profane to mention such tender mysteries. Arthur Haldane and Letty Lisgard were not indeed a betrothed couple when they met upon the present occasion, but they became so before they parted. Their subject of conversation being the marriage of somebody else, it naturally enough strayed to their own. “I am not a good match for you, Letty, just at present,” said the young man frankly, during a lucid interval, “but I do not despair of removing the disparity of fortune. I am getting on in my profession better than I could have hoped for.”

“I don’t see why ‘disparity’ of any sort, dear Arthur, should affect persons who really love one another.”

"That's my own sweet Letty," replied the other (relapsing). "But then your family — no exertions of mine can procure for me such a pedigree as you can boast of."

"That is a matter of genuine congratulation, Arthur. Dear Richard often makes me wish that there were no such things as ancestors. I suppose it is a dreadful heresy, but it seems to me so strange that people are not taken for what they *are*, let their birth be what it will."

"My Rose of Radicals!" exclaimed the young man with admiration; "your words deserve to be written in letters of gold." And so saying, he took out his pocket-book, and, in spite of her opposition, transcribed them then and there.

"Of what possible good can *that* be, you dear foolish fellow?"

"I cannot say for certain, Letty," answered he gravely. "But keep a thing long enough, and its use will come, folks say."

Mr. Arthur Haldane had, as we are aware, some other interviews awaiting him, less agreeable than the one on hand, which perhaps may account for his prolonging it to an inordinate length. There was no difference of opinion expressed in this one; and what is unusual in arguments between the sexes, the lady had not the last word at parting. Strictly speaking, neither had it. The farewell of each expired almost at the same instant, and was not breathed into the *ear* at all: I say "almost" advisedly, and from a desire to be accurate, for if each imprints a kiss upon the other's *cheek*, they cannot do it quite coincidentally; and it is certain, if the statistics of the matter could be collected, that nine engaged couples (for, of course, no couple does it who are *not* engaged) out of every ten do salute one another in that way, and not press "lip to lip," as the poets make out; in fact, it requires a particular and uniform conformation of nose — both must be "snubs" — to render the thing practicable.

Sir Richard, whom we have been compelled occasionally to represent in an unfavourable light, did not fall short, in his interview with Arthur Haldane, of the high estimate which the latter had formed of his chivalric nature ; or perhaps it was through his overweening pride, that could not permit the woman upon whom his affections had once condescended to rest, to be inconvenienced by narrow circumstances ; but actuated by whatever motive, his behaviour towards the rash young couple was liberal in the extreme. He accepted very willingly the explanation, given by the young lawyer with great tact, of his refusal by Rose Aynton. No utterance was given to the remark, that if he had pressed his suit a little earlier, doubtless no thought of his younger brother would have entered the girl's brain ; but the suggestion was, somehow or other, delicately conveyed, and in that Gilead there was balm. Strange as it may appear, the object of his rejected suit seemed to have won forgiveness not only for herself, but for her husband, to whose faults he had heretofore shown himself so unfraternally alive. He certainly did not request Arthur to offer his congratulations to the young Benedict ; but he sent by him a conciliatory message, and a special request that Captain and Mrs. Lisgard would not fail to visit the Abbey upon the occasion of the approaching *fête*. The period of his own coming of age would be a very fitting one for the newly-married pair to introduce themselves to the people of the country, while their presence at such a time would evidence that there was no family breach. In all this, there was doubtless a leaven of selfishness ; but there was considerable magnanimity also, and the manner in which the baronet spoke of Rose herself would have done honour to Bayard. In this matter, it must be even conceded that he showed more nobility of spirit than the ladies of his household. His mother had forgiven the girl, after a fashion, it is true ; but her feelings towards her were anything but genial. One's heart cannot be made to yearn towards a sly and deceitful young person,

just because she happens to be one's daughter-in-law. Her pity for Walter was great, but it did not beget love for *her*.

With Letty, again, Rose stood even lower, or perhaps seemed to do so, from the higher eminence which she had previously occupied in the affections of her school-friend. A young lady who has sworn an eternal friendship, does not relish the discovery that the other party to that solemn transaction has been making a fool of her under her own roof for months ! nay, has been systematically deceiving her upon a matter, mutual confidences concerning which form the very basis of such compacts—namely, the beloved object. Young men do not encourage one another to communicate their honest love-secrets, although some are boastful enough of their conquests over the sex, where there is no pretence of the heart being concerned: but with young ladies, this sort of information is the most prized of all. There is a tacit, if not an expressed understanding between female friends, that the first genuine “attachment” formed by either shall at once be revealed to the other. The expectation of that tender avowal is what is uppermost in their minds whenever they meet; and when it *has* been made, what an endless subject of sympathy does the unconscious swain become between these devoted young persons ! How the qualities of his mind are canvassed, and the colour of his hair ; how his religious principles are eulogised, and also his small feet ; and how, in short, the betrothed and her faithful confidante construct a mental and physical ideal for Jones, out of what they have read of the Admirable Crichton and the Apollo Belvedere. Letty Lisgard was as good a girl — in my opinion — as ever drew breath ; but she was human, and when she kissed Rose the first time after she learned she had become her sister, it was by no means the impassioned salute which it had used to be, nor had her “my dear,”

although delivered with emphasis, at all the genuine ring.

As for the other females at the Abbey, it was fortunate for Rose that she had not to apply to *them* for a character ; for although Mistress Forest knew her place better than to circulate scandal, Miss Anne Rees, no longer restrained by terror of constabulary, indemnified herself for previous reticence, by favouring her fellow-servants with some very curious details indeed with respect to Mrs. Walter Lisgard. My lady's proposal, that Rose should take advantage of Mr. Arthur Haldane's escort on the morrow to her aunt's house, until she should receive her husband's directions as to her future place of abode, was, I think, very generally welcomed, and felt to be a relief by the whole house.

During the long railway journey to town, however, she made herself agreeable enough to her companion, as she was well able to do, when so disposed, to all his sex. The young barrister was prudent and sagacious beyond his years, and what he knew of the lady's behaviour, did not certainly prepossess him in her favour ; but, nevertheless, he was obliged to confess to himself (although he omitted to do so to Letty) that Mrs. Walter Lisgard was a very charming person. It is undeniable that a married woman may make herself twice as pleasant, for any short interval, like a railway journey, as any single one can do ; she is not afraid of being considered too forward, or of laying herself out to captivate ; while, if you are a bachelor with whose *tendresse* for any fair one she is acquainted, she will take you under her patronage, notwithstanding that you may be twice her age, and so sympathise with you, and identify herself with your absent intended, that you are half inclined to squeeze her hand, and cover it with kisses. Mr. Arthur Haldane had much too judicial a mind to give way to any impulse of that kind, but it was very nice to hear Rose eulogise her " darling Letty," and protest that the man who married her would find

himself united with an angel. He quite forgot, under this soothing treatment, that his impression on leaving the Abbey was, that the two young ladies were not very good friends ; nor did it occur to him at all that this privilege of matronly talk was being exercised by a bride not two months wedded, and whose surreptitious marriage had only been discovered about a week ago. When they had reached London, and were approaching her aunt's residence in the late afternoon, they found themselves suddenly in a broad stream of vehicles, for the most part furnished with four horses, but very unlike the usual spick-and-span London equipages, being covered with white dust, and bearing traces of recent rapid travel.

"I quite forgot it was the Derby Day," exclaimed Arthur : "these are the gentlemen of the road, and I dare say your husband is among them."

Rose turned quite pale, and leaning back in the cab, did not again look out of window until they arrived at her aunt's door, where the two companions parted very good friends indeed. Rose gave a little sigh as she thanked him for his escort, which went—not indeed to the young man's heart, but a good way too.

"I hope Master Walter does not ill-treat that poor girl," soliloquised Arthur as he drove away ; "but I am almost certain that she's afraid of him."

London after the Derby is more like Pandemonium even than on the night before ; the winners are wild with joy, and inclined for any sort of dissipation ; the losers also crave for the Circean cup, that they may temporarily forget their misfortunes. With the unusual roar of wheel and hoof in the streets, there mixes a still more unusual shouting ; and from the open windows of places of entertainment, there streams forth the tangled talk which is confined within doors at other times. Before Arthur could reach the *Turf Hotel*, he learned from these sources, without further inquiry, that *The King* had won the race, in consequence of some mischance having

happened to the jockey of *Menelaus*. He knew, therefore that Walter Lisgard had lost money. Still, when upon reaching his lodging he first set eyes upon the young dragoon, moodily stretched upon the sofa, with eyes staring straight before him, and a face as pale as the table-cloth, on which stood an untasted meal, he was astonished and shocked. For the moment — such a rigidity was there about those exquisite features—Arthur thought with a shudder that he was dead. Even after he entered the room, lit only from the glaring street, not a limb stirred, not a muscle moved to mark any consciousness of his presence; but when he exclaimed : “Walter ! what’s the matter, man ?” the figure leapt up with a cry of pleasure, and took both his hands in his.

“ I am glad to see you, Arthur,” cried he. “ This is very kind of you, and I do not deserve it. I thought it was that infernal scoundrel Derrick.”

“ He is not here, then ? ”

“ No ; he may have come and gone, for all I know, for I believe I have been in a sort of nightmare ; only it was a horse that caused it. Derrick’s partner — or Derrick himself, for what I know—sold the race. I know what you are going to say, that you always told me how it would be——”

“ No, indeed, Walter,” interrupted Arthur kindly. “ I am not come hither to reproach you. I am only the bearer of good news.”

“ I should like to hear some of that,” said the other bitterly. “ Where is it ? Have you brought a loaded pistol with you ? That would be the most friendly action you could do me just now, I believe.”

“ Walter, you should not talk like that,” answered Arthur very gravely, for there was a look in his friend’s eyes which seemed to harmonise only too well with his despairing words. “ When we kill ourselves so philosophically, we forget how we wound others by that selfish act. Think of your mother, lad.”

"Yes. She would be sorry, would she not?"

"It would break her heart, Walter; that's all. And besides, you have a wife now—yes, we all know it, and you're both forgiven—and why you have not written to her in answer to the letter she wrote you, none of us can imagine."

"I only got it this very day," groaned Walter. "Am I in a fit state to write upon business, think you?"

"Business!" echoed Arthur contemptuously; "you're in a fit state to take a cab to Mayfair, and ask your poor wife's pardon. I brought her up to her aunt's house today myself."

"That's well," observed Walter reflectively; "for between you and me, Arthur Haldane——"

"Well, what?" exclaimed the barrister impatiently.

"Why, I think she'd better stay at her aunt's house altogether. The fact is, I've got no money to keep her."

"We know all about that, man——"

"The devil you do!" ejaculated Walter grimly; "then bad news must indeed fly apace. Look here, Haldane—I've lost *everything*. All that I have at present; all that I was to have when I came of age; all that I can expect from any human being who is fool enough to leave me anything in time to come. I am a beggar, and worse than that, for I am a defaulter, and shall be proclaimed as such in a few days. That is the whole state of the case. Now, do you not think that the kindest office which a friend could do me, would be to help me with the means of blowing out, what would be in another man, his brains? For not only do I recognise myself a scoundrel, but as a senseless dolt and idiot, a fool of the first quality, and a——"

"You must owe, then, near seven thousand pounds," interrupted Arthur, with something like a groan.

"Just about that, so far as I have dared to look the thing in the face; all lost within twenty-four hours—most of it within three minutes."

"We must keep this from your mother, somehow, Walter. She has been sadly tried, and I doubt whether she could bear it."

"She must know it sooner or later, man, even if she doesn't read it in the papers. When your Turf gentry do not get paid, they make a noise about it, you see, that being all they can do. I've a precious good mind to take myself off to Cariboo—that's where this fellow Derrick made his money—the climate's good, and with a little capital, one may do a good deal. Why should I not go there, and never let them have a penny? The law looks upon it as a swindle, *you* know that well enough; and it *was* a swindle, by Jove! Come, you're a barrister, Haldane; now, what do you say about it?"

"No, Walter, I cannot advise you to act in that manner, and I am sure you did not propose it seriously yourself."

"Oh no, certainly not; I was only having a bit of fun," rejoined the other bitterly. "I am just in the humour for joking now, and can't resist it. Thousand devils! would you have me go to the workhouse, man, or where?"

"Nothing of that sort is at all necessary, Walter," answered the other quietly. "Of course, I was not prepared for this very unfortunate position of affairs; I had brought news that, through, I must say, the very generous behaviour of your elder brother, your income as a married man would in future be a very tolerable one; it has been made up to at least double what the interest of the sum you have lost would have produced. Thus, in addition to your pay, you would have had about six hundred a year, besides whatever your wife's aunt might think proper to allow her. Your mother, on the other hand, undertakes, if you should scruple to accept this kindness at Sir Richard's hands—"

"Scruple? Certainly *not*," ejaculated Walter angrily.

"I confess that I did not think my brother would have had so much proper feeling, and I am much obliged to him, of course; but, after all, he has only done his duty. What is three hundred a year out of the Lisgard rent-roll?"

"Still, he was not obliged to do it," observed Arthur drily.

"That is true; and, of course, you take the lawyer's view of it. Moreover, when he comes to hear of these debts, perhaps his Serene Highness may think proper to withdraw his gracious assistance."

"You do him very wrong, Walter," answered Arthur with warmth. "Your trouble makes you say things you ought to be ashamed of — yes, ashamed of. Your brother, with all his faults, is incapable of committing such an act of cruelty. He is quite willing that you should both return to Mirk as soon as you please, but particularly that you should be present at his coming of age, which I am sure you will not fail to be. But if you will take my advice, you will not make your position known at Mirk, for, as I have said before, your mother has had enough to trouble her. You must let your sporting friends understand it, however, and we must make the best arrangements we can for your paying your debts within a year; and for the future, till something turns up, instead of six hundred per annum, you must manage to do on three. Your wife, I am sure, is a most sensible young lady, and will easily perceive the necessity for economy."

"Thank you," answered the dragoon coldly. "Perhaps you would like to run down to Canterbury, and choose our lodging for us; or do you think we ought to be content to live in barracks? I know that there is a great temptation to insult a man when he is down; but for giving unpalatable advice in an offensive manner, I do not know your equal, Mr. Arthur Haldane."

"Well, Walter, I have said what I thought right, and

I do not intend to quarrel with you. I should wish, on the contrary, to remain your friend, if it were only for your dear mother's sake——”

“And somebody else's,” interrupted the captain with a sneer.

“Yes; for your sister Letty's, Walter; I frankly own that. Come, give us your hand, man.—Well, another time, then, when you are more like yourself.—But before I go, I want to find this man Derrick, for I have a letter for him of importance from Mistress Forest.”

“You had better ask as you go down stairs, Mr. Haldane; I know nothing about him.” And with that, Captain Walter Lisgard deliberately turned his back upon his visitor, and looked gloomily out of the window; while his white hand stroked his silken moustaches as though it were a pumice-stone, and it was his intention to stroke them off.

Arthur made his inquiry of the servant who opened the hall-door to let him out.

“Mr. Derrick—if that was the gentleman with the large beard—had come and gone within the last quarter of an hour, while he (Haldane) had been talking with the other gentleman up stairs. He had called for his bill, and paid it, and packed his portmanteau, and there it was in the passage at the present moment.”

“Then he must come back for *that*,” exclaimed Arthur eagerly.

“No. He had left directions that it was to be sent on to him in a week or so to some place in the south. He had said that he should be walking, and therefore would not be there himself for several days. He had taken a knapsack with him as for a regular tour. He was a strange gentleman altogether.”

Arthur Haldane stooped down, and read the address on the portmanteau—*Mr. R. Derrick, Coveton*; then stepped very thoughtfully into the roaring street. “I don't know exactly why, and I certainly have no desire

to know," muttered the young barrister to himself; "but of all the bad news I have learned to-night, I fear *ma mère* will consider this the worst. Why the deuce should this fellow be going to Coveton, of all places least calculated to attract such a scampish vagabond? Coveton, Coveton—yes, that is the place where my lady came ashore from the wreck of the *North Star*."





CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LETTER FROM PARIS.

Tis the morning after the Derby Day, and Sir Richard, who has never had a shilling upon that national event, yet reads with interest the prose-poem upon the subject in the *Times*, over the breakfast-table, and even favours Letty—which is so unusual a piece of graciousness, that it almost suggests the idea of making amends for something—with extracts from the same, aloud. He and his sister are alone at the morning meal, for my lady, as is often the case now, has had her tea and dry toast sent up to her in her own room, as also a couple of letters—one from Arthur Haldane, and one with the Paris post-mark, and in a foreign hand.

“Lord Stonart is said to have netted forty thousand pounds : just think of that, Letty.”

“Yes, Richard ; but then think of the poor people that lost it.”

“Poor people should not bet,” returned the baronet severely. “I am sorry for Mr. Chifney, since, if he had not quarrelled with his lordship, the winner would have come out of his stables. As it was, he very nearly accomplished it with that French horse *Menelaus*—a success which I should, as an Englishman, have much deplored.”

"Dear me ! was not that the horse in which Walter was so much interested?"

"I am sure I don't know, Letty. I should think my brother had no money to spare for the race-course, under present circumstances : he could surely never be such a fool."

"Very likely not, Richard. I never said a word about his risking money ; I only said he was 'interested.'"

"Ah !" rejoined the baronet significantly, "I dare say ;" and then he began to whistle, as was not unusual with him when thoroughly displeased. Presently, however, recollecting that this was not a sociable sort of thing to do, Sir Richard abruptly observed : "Mamma had a letter from Paris this morning, and in a foreign hand ; I wonder who her correspondent is. I do not think she has heard from abroad since immediately after our poor father's death. Then I remember several of her old French friends wrote to her."

"I hope it is no ill news of any kind, for I am getting quite anxious about dear mamma, Richard. Ever since Christmas last, she has seemed to get more and more depressed."

"I have only observed it lately," answered the baronet, rather stiffly ; "and I am sure we have not far to look for the reason.—By-the-bye, there was a letter for her from Arthur Haldane also."

"Oh ! was there ?" said Letty carelessly, but turning a lively pink. Then after a short pause, during which the baronet resumed his paper : "If you will not have another cup of coffee, Richard, I think I will go up and see mamma."

At that moment, the door opened, and my lady herself entered the room. Her cheeks were ashy pale, but her eyes were beaming with excitement, and the hand in which she held an open letter trembled as she spoke. "Oh, I have got such good news, Richard !"

"What ! from Arthur ?" cried Letty. "Ah ! I thought he would arrange everything as it should be."

Sir Richard frowned, and seemed about to speak, but did not do so.

"Yes, I have heard from Arthur too," said my lady; "and very satisfactorily, although, perhaps, there may be matters which may require my presence in town for a day or two."

"You may always command my services, mother: I can start at five minutes' notice," said Sir Richard gravely.

"No, my dear boy; if I have to go at all—which is not certain—I shall certainly go alone, or rather with nobody but Mary. You will be full of preparations for your *fête*, I know, for one only comes of age once in one's lifetime; and besides, to tell you the truth, you would be of no use at all." Here she kissed him tenderly, and pushed her fingers through his brown curls lingeringly, as though she was already wishing him farewell. "But the good news I speak of is a much more selfish affair than you dream of. I have had a letter from my dear old friend, Madame de Castellan, who used to be so good to me when I was no older than you, Letty, at Dijon."

"I remember her," said Sir Richard. "She came to stay at the Abbey when I was about nine, did she not, and took such a fancy to dear old Belcomb? She said that she and I would marry as soon as I got old enough, and set up an establishment in the little cottage. A charming old lady, with snow-white hair, but a slight deficiency of teeth."

"Just so," answered my lady. "She always vowed she would have nothing false about her, as long as she lived, and she is alive now, and apparently very hearty. But she has had some money losses, as well as certain domestic misfortunes, which induce her to seek an entire change of life. It is a most singular thing that you should have recollect ed her passion for Belcomb, for it is about that very place that she has written. She wishes to know whether she could be our tenant there,

at all events for the summer. The matter is in your hands, Richard, or will be so in a week or two, but I confess I should like to have her for a neighbour exceedingly."

"Then by all means write and say 'Come,'" cried the baronet; "and why not let her have Belcomb rent free? I dare say she would not mind our having our picnics there occasionally; and it is really no loss to me, for I don't believe anybody but herself would dream of taking it, except in the shooting season."

"Then that is arranged," answered my lady joyfully. "I am to write by return of post," she says; "and if the letter says 'Yes,' that then we may expect her any day. She will bring her own French maid; and I will drive over to-day, and arrange about old Rachel and her husband, who, of course, must be no losers, if they have to leave. That must be Madame's own affair, if she is really to have the place for nothing. See how affectionately the dear old lady writes, and what a capital hand, considering her advanced age!"

"Yes, indeed," said Sir Richard, elevating his eyebrows: "only, to say the truth, I am not good at French manuscript—"

"Although a master of that language, when in printed books," interrupted Letty.

"Well, the fact is, they didn't teach that sort of thing at Eton in my time," answered the baronet frankly; "or, at all events, they didn't teach *me*. However, French is not so bad as German, that I will say. One can pronounce it without speaking from the pit of one's stomach."

"Yes, one can—after a fashion," laughed Letty a little scornfully; but her elder brother seemed resolved to take all her bantering in good part that morning, as the imperial lion will sometimes tolerate the gambols of a companion kitten. "I don't think, however," she continued, "Madame de Castellan, who comes from Paris, will quite understand *you*, Richard.—How nicely

she speaks of Mary, mamma. Why, how comes she to know so much about *her*?"

"Why, when I went to Dijon, before my marriage, Mary Forest went with me, you know, and remained there several years."

"Ah, yes, of course; I had forgotten."

"And when we were at the—the college," continued my lady, with a slight tinge of colour, "Madame took pity upon us both, being foreigners, and was kind to us beyond all measure. Many a happy day have we passed in her pretty château together; and indeed I think I owe my Parisian pronunciation—of which you seem to make so much, Letty—at least as much to Madame de Castellan as to my paid teachers. She never could speak English, if you remember, Richard; everything she addressed to you had to be translated."

"Dear me," answered the baronet hastily, "I don't like that. I hope she has learned English since then. It places one in a very humiliating position to be talked to in a language one does not understand; unless you can treat the person as a savage, which, to say the truth, I always feel inclined to do."

"Well, Richard," said my lady smiling, "if I am not at your elbow when Madame de Castellan calls, there will be always Letty here, who is cunning in such tongue-fence, to protect you; but, as a matter of fact, we shall see my poor old friend but very seldom. She is a good deal broken, I fear, by time, and still more by trouble"—here my lady's own voice began to quaver a little—"and all she seems to desire is quiet and seclusion, before her day of rest at last shall dawn."

"She will be very welcome," answered Sir Richard tenderly. "I hope that you will cause everything for her comfort to be looked to at Belcomb, and I will again repeat my orders to Rinkel that the place is to be kept quite free from trespassers."

He rose and kissed his mother, then, as he left the room, delayed with his fingers on the door-handle, saying:

"Have Walter and—and his wife consented to be present at my coming of age?"

"Certainly, dear Richard: they will both be very pleased to come—nay, Arthur thinks that they may return to the Abbey immediately. It is scarcely worth while for them to take a house, or rather lodgings, at Canterbury, since they are to be here so soon. Walter has leave now, it seems, and there will be no difficulty in getting it prolonged almost indefinitely: he can do anything he likes with his colonel, you know, as indeed ——"

"Exactly," interrupted Sir Richard, drily. "Then I suppose they will be back in a few days." And with that he placed the door between himself and the threatened eulogy upon Master Walter.

"Was there any particular message for me, mamma?" inquired Letty, demurely.

"From Walter? No, dear. He sent his love to us all; but of course he feels a little embarrassed, and perhaps scarcely understands that he has been forgiven. Oh, I forgot: you meant was there any particular message from Arthur Haldane, you exacting little puss! Why, he only left us yesterday morning! But don't be vexed, my darling. You have won the love of a man who knows your worth almost as well as I do. He may not be so brilliant or so handsome as our darling Walter—and indeed who is?—but I must say he has shown much better taste in choosing a wife. He has both wisdom and goodness, my darling child, and I firmly believe your future happiness is assured."

"Yes, dearest mother, I do believe it; but——"

Here Letty's eyes began not only to sparkle, but to distil pearls and diamonds in the most lavish and apparently uncalled-for profusion.

"Why, what is the matter now, my love?" inquired my lady.

"Nothing, mamma—nothing at least that I should have thought it worth while to tell you, had I not been overcome by your kind words. I know you have got

troubles enough of your own ; I did not mean to tell you, indeed I did not ; I tried to forget it myself. Only last night, after you had gone to bed, Richard sat up with me talking about his future, and it seems he has made some plan for mine. He spoke of Mr. Charles Vane as a person he would like to have for a brother-in-law. He bade me be particularly civil to him at the coming *fête*, and when I said that I did not very much care about Mr. Vane—and, in fact, that I had already— Oh, mamma, Richard said some very cruel things. He reminded me that one member of the family had already made a disreputable marriage——”

“That was an ungenerous speech, and very unlike my Richard,” interposed my lady, with emphasis. “Why, he would have married Rose himself.”

“So I have sometimes thought,” replied Letty, simply : “but to do him justice, I think he was referring to the clandestine character of the marriage rather than to the match itself. However, when he used the word disreputable in connection with Arthur Haldane, he made me very angry, I own. I told him that Arthur was worth all the Vanes that had ever been born, whether there might have been nineteen generations of them (as he boasted) or a hundred and ninety. And I am afraid, dear mamma, that I snapped my fingers, and said that I did not care *that*, when he accused dearest Arthur of not having a great-grandfather. At all events, Richard stalked out of the drawing-room vastly offended; and although he has been endeavouring to be extra civil to me this morning, I know that it is only that he may again introduce the very objectionable subject of Mr. Charles Vane ; and when I say ‘No’ with decision, as of course I shall do, I fear that he may take it upon himself to write to Arthur ; and then, dearest mother, the Haldanes are so proud, you know, that I don’t know what may happen.”

Strange as it may seem, there had flitted across my lady’s face during this recital a look of something like relief—for it surely could not have been satisfaction—

but it speedily gave place to that expression of distress that had become only too habitual to her once serene and comely features. Perhaps, accustomed to mischance as she now was, she had expected even more unwelcome news, and had felt momentarily thankful matters were no worse ; but now all was gloom again.

" You were quite right to tell me this, Letty, even though it does give me a new cause for grief. If I know Arthur Haldane, he will not desert his betrothed wife on account of any slight that may be put upon him by any other human being. You may be quite at ease about that, I am very sure. But these dissensions and disagreements among my own children—I know it is not your fault, dear Letty—but I feel that I cannot bear up under them. You will not have me with you here much longer."

" Oh, mamma—dear, dear mamma, how selfish it was of me thus to afflict you further. But don't, don't talk like that. What should we do without you—you the sole bond that unites your boys together : and *I*? Oh, mother, what would become of *me*? You don't know how I love you."

" Yes, darling, I do. You are tender-hearted as you are dutiful. And my boys, to do them justice, they love me too ; but they are wearing me into my grave. At least, I feel it would be far better if I were lying there."

" Oh, mamma, mamma," sighed Letty, covering my lady's tearful face with kisses, " you will break my heart if you talk so."

" You will have somebody better able to take care of you even than I, dear child, when I am gone. And I will see that it is so. Yes, I will leave directions behind me—you will find them in my desk, Letty ; remember this, should anything happen to me—about that matter as well as other things. Richard will respect my wishes in such a case, I know, and will offer no opposition."

" But, dearest mother, do you feel ill?" cried Letty in

an agony, "that you talk of such things as these? Let us send for the doctor from Dalwynch. How I wish that Arthur's father could be prevailed on to come and see you! Oh, mamma! I would rather die than you, although I am sure I am not half so fit for death!"

"Dear child, dear child!" sobbed my lady. "It will be a bitter parting indeed for both of us—when the time comes. Perhaps it may not be so near at hand as I feared. In the meantime, rest assured, love, that if I feel a doctor can do me any good, he shall be sent for at once. But it is the mind, and not the body, which has need of medicine.—There, dry your eyes, and let us hope for the best. You will drive over with me this afternoon, will you not, to Belcomb? There is no time to lose in getting things ready there for our new tenant."





CHAPTER XXVII.

MADAME DE CASTELLAN.

GPON the fourth day after the reception of her Paris letter, my lady had to leave Mirk for town on business connected with Walter's affairs—for, after all, she cannot permit his elder brother to bear the whole brunt of these unexpected expenses. Her visit was to the family lawyer, and she went alone save for the attendance of Mistress Forest. Under any circumstances, she would rather it were thus, she repeats, even if the preparations going on at Mirk did not take up so fully Sir Richard's time, and render his accompanying her out of the question. For this coming of age was a case wherein surely a man might busy himself even though the whole affair was to be held in his own honour ; the very name of Lisgard being in a manner at stake, and obnoxious to censure, if everything should not be in a fitting scale and perfect of its kind ; nay (though certainly more remotely), might not the great principle of Territorial Aristocracy have been almost said to be upon its trial upon the coming occasion ? The business must have been pressing indeed, remarked the baronet a little pointedly, that took the mistress of Mirk from home at such an important epoch ; and he thought in his heart that his mother might have put off this signature of a few parchments until after the fête-day. However, it was plain that my lady considered the call to

town imperative, since she started thither upon the very morning of the day on which her old friend Madame de Castellan had appointed to reach Belcomb ; and although she hoped to be able to return on the ensuing afternoon, in company with Walter and his wife, whose marriage had been in the meantime publicly announced, it was not certain that her affairs could be transacted within such time as would permit her to do so. And so it unfortunately turned out. About an hour after luncheon, the carriage having been despatched from the Abbey to Dalwynch station just so long as would admit of its return with its expected inmates, the sound of wheels was heard in the avenue, and both Sir Richard and Letty felt the colour come into their cheeks. Each imagined that it was the Return of the Prodigal (in this case rendered more embarrassing by the fact of his bringing his wife with him). Suppose their mother should have been prevented from accompanying Captain and Mrs. Lisgard ! How very awkward and disconcerting would this first interview be ; and especially for the poor baronet, who had never seen Rose, at least to his own knowledge, as a married woman. His brother's bride too ! Sir Richard rather repented for that minute or too that he had made such a point of the young couple returning to Mirk so soon. He felt quite grateful to his sister when she placed her hand upon his arm, and whispered : “ Had we not better go out to meet them, Richard ? ” At any other time, he would perhaps have resented her offer to share the duties of host ; for was it not his place, and his alone, to bid guests welcome to Mirk Abbey ? But upon this occasion he accepted it gladly ; and it was lucky for him he did.

Instead of the gay barouche and glistening steeds from his own stables, he beheld, when he reached the hall steps, the Dalwynch fly—for the little town only boasted of one such conveyance—a yellow single-seated machine, which had once been proud to call itself a post-chaise, and been whirled through the air by panting wheelers and

leaders ; but it was now dragged along by animals so melancholy and slow, that but for their colour and shortness of tail, they might have been hearse-horses ; while the driver had a lugubrious expression too, as befitted one who felt that he should never buckle on his single spur again, or crack his whip in triumph, as he came up the street of the county town at a hand-gallop. But the tenant of this vehicle was a far more old-world-looking object than itself or its belongings ; a very ancient and silvery-haired lady, looking almost double even as she sat, and only able, painfully, to alight from her carriage by aid of Mr. Robert's arm and a crutched stick. Her complexion was an agreeable gingerbread ; she had not above three teeth, which, however, were very white ones, left in either jaw ; and her head shook from side to side with the palsy of extreme old age. But despite these disadvantages, she had by no means an unpleasant expression ; and Sir Richard, with his fête-day running in his head, was somehow reminded of one of those beneficent old fairies, who, at considerable personal inconvenience, used to make a point of being present at the christening, marriage, and other important occasions in the life of the young prince with whose royal mother they had been such great friends in years gone by. He hurried down the steps to offer his arm to this strange visitor, and bid her respectful welcome.

"Madame de Castellan, for I think it can be no one else," said he ; "it is most kind of you to treat us thus. We ought to have been at Belcomb ourselves by this time, instead of your being here, and indeed we should have been there yesterday, had my mother been at home ; but important business has taken her to London, and I much regret to say that she has not even yet returned, although we are expecting her every minute."

Either the exertion of alighting, or the reception of this unexpected news, set the poor old lady shaking to that degree, that it seemed a wonder that she did not shake to pieces. She fell to kissing Letty, doubtless partly from

affection, but also perhaps as an excuse for not immediately commencing the ascent of those dreadful stairs.

"You don't either of you remember me, I dare say," mumbled she in the French tongue.

Sir Richard smiled and bowed, as being the safest reply he could frame to a question of which he understood nothing.

"Ah, Heaven, he does!" cried the old lady with evident delight. "This is an excellent young man; and yet he was but a very little boy. And Miss Letty? No, she does not remember—how should she? she was too young! And Walter—the pretty boy, so *spirituel*, with his black velvet frock and short sleeves tied with scarlet ribbon—where was he? What! grown up and married? Was it possible? How time had flown; alas, alas! And the good Dr. Haldane and his wife, was he here as much as usual? clever, sarcastic little gentleman!"

Not even the allusions to their own childhood gave Richard and his sister so vast a notion of the time that had elapsed since Madame de Castellan's previous visit to the Abbey, as this last remark of hers; for the occurrence which had shut out the good doctor from the Abbey had happened so long ago that it was almost legendary; and they were so accustomed to his absence, that they could not picture to themselves the state of things to which this patriarchal old lady referred as a matter of course. As for Mrs. Haldane, they had heard of the existence of such a person, and that was all. That good woman had not made much noise in the world when she was alive, and she had been among the silent now for more than eleven years. How far back were the explanations to begin, thought Letty and her brother, that would make this female Rip Van Winkle *au fait* with the present order of things?

But the old Frenchwoman was fortunately not nearly so anxious to be answered as she was to talk, a feat which she accomplished with much more distinctness

than could have been expected, notwithstanding that Sir Richard subsequently ascribed to her paucity of teeth the fact that he only understood about two words out of her every five.

It was very amusing to watch the poor young baronet listening with fruitless diligence to her rapid syllables, and then turning an imploring glance upon his sister and sworn interpreter for aid and rescue. He was obliged upon two occasions to frame some halting reply with his own lips ; once when Madame openly complimented him upon his good looks and gallant bearing ; and secondly, when she thanked him for the readiness with which he had placed the cottage at Belcomb at her disposal ; but for the rest, the burden of conversation rested upon Letty.

“ And how is Marie—how is the good Marie, who was to your dear mamma like a servant and a sister in one ? ” asked the old lady, when they had got her with some difficulty into the drawing-room.

“ She is well, Madame ; but in some trouble about a certain suitor, whom ” (here she pouted a little) “ Sir Richard here considers to be undesirable.”

Madame raised her rather shaggy eyebrows, and looked towards the young baronet as if for an explanation. He knew that they were speaking of Mistress Forest, and that was all.

“ An admirable person,” said he earnestly ; “ most trustworthy in every way. We have all cause to be more than satisfied.”

“ Ah, then he does not object after all ! ” exclaimed Madame triumphantly.—“ And Master Walter—what sort of a wife has he got ? Beautiful ? That is well ; it would be a pity if it were otherwise. And clever ? Excellent ! And also good, I hope ? ”

“ Well, Madame, she will be here in a minute, so that you may judge for yourself,” answered Letty smiling, but by no means displeased to hear the craunch of carriage-wheels upon the gravel of the terraced drive. These

home questions concerning her new sister-in-law were getting rather difficult to answer, and especially in Richard's presence.

"Will your mother be with them?" inquired Madame, gathering from the faces of her companions, rather than from any sound which could have reached her tardy ears, that the arrival of those expected was imminent.

"As I said before, Madame, I cannot promise; but I sincerely trust, for your sake—as, indeed, for her own—that it may be so. I am sure mamma will deeply grieve to have missed you."

The next moment, Captain and Mrs. Lisgard were announced. Richard walked straight up to Rose, and taking her hand in his best Sir Roger de Coverley manner, bade her frank but stately welcome. Then, "How are you, Walter?" said he, giving his brother's fingers an earnest squeeze, and simulating cordiality all he could. "Here is a very old friend of our mother's, Madame de Castellan, who remembers you in a velvet frock with short sleeves and cherry-coloured ribbons."

For the first time, Sir Richard blessed this old lady's presence, which was so greatly mitigating to him the difficulties of this dreaded interview; but Walter appeared to be but little embarrassed; less so, indeed, than Madame herself, who, overcome, doubtless, by the strong resemblance to his mother in the young man now presented to her, began to tremble again almost as much as she had done a while ago.

"And this is Master Walter," said she in broken tones. "I think I should have known that without any introduction." Here she held him with both her hands at arms' length. "I suppose, now, you do not remember me at all?"

"Madame," returned the young man in bad French, but briskly enough, and with a very pleasant smile, "I cannot say I do. Little folks in velvet frocks have very bad memories. But I have often heard my dear mother speak of you most affectionately; indeed she wrote to me

of your expected arrival at Belcomb with greater pleasure than I have known her to take in anything for years."

"Except your marriage, Mister the Captain, eh?" returned the old lady archly. "Come, introduce me to your lovely bride. Ah, Heaven, what a young couple! Well, I like to see that—I who might be the great-grandmother of both of you.—How are you, Madame Walter? What do they call you? Rose! Ah, a charming name."

But though the name was so charming, and the young lady was so lovely, Madame de Castellan did not take her to her arms and embrace her as she had taken Letty. Indeed, if it was possible for Rose to look disconcerted, she would have done so now, as she stood with cast-down eyes, exposed to the same steady scrutiny as her husband had just been subjected to; but there was by no means so much affection in the old lady's gaze on this occasion. When she had regarded her sufficiently, she dismissed her with a patronising tap upon the head, and once more addressed herself to Walter. "And what have you done with your mamma, Sir?"

"I have done nothing, Madame," answered he laughing. "She has never given me the chance of making away with her, if it is of that you suspect me; for she never came to see us in town at all. We were to meet at the station this morning, but she was not there. I am afraid, therefore—for she dislikes travelling at night—that we shall not see her before this time to-morrow."

Master Walter was in very different cue from that in which we saw him last. The burden of his difficulties had been lifted from his shoulders, at all events for the present. He had been saved at least from ruin, and that, though he might be henceforth compelled to live the life of a poor man, was a matter of congratulation; just as one is thankful, in shipwreck upon the desolate seas, to land on even a barren rock. His spirits were always buoyant, and they were now asserting themselves after a period of severest pressure. In short, Master Walter was

himself again—good-humoured, graceful, and as desirous as well fitted to please all with whom he came into contact. It was plain that he had made a complete conquest of this old Frenchwoman.

"And Marie, have you hidden *her* anywhere, you naughty boy?"

"Not I, Madame. If you saw her, you would understand that she is not easily hidden. You remember her plump, I dare say; but plump is now no word for her. Even love—and she is love-sick, poor thing, at five-and-forty, or so—does not render her less solid."

"Ah, wicked, to laugh at love!" replied the old lady, holding up a reproving finger, of whose shape and whiteness she was evidently proud, and not altogether without reason; "and worse still, to laugh at Marie. I love that dear Mistress Forest; and mind you, tell mamma, if ever she parts with her, that she is to come straight to me. What would I not give for a waiting-maid like that—devoted, prudent, to whom I could confide my little love-affairs!—Why do you laugh, rude children? It is, I see, time that I should go.—Seriously," continued she, when the chorus of dissatisfaction had died away (for everyone except, perhaps, Rose, was pleased with this sprightly old lady, and all felt her presence to be, under the circumstances, an immense relief), "I must be going home at once. Thank you kindly, Sir Richard, but to stay to dinner is impossible. The night-air, at my time of life—more even than 'five-or-forty or so,' Mister the Captain—is very unwholesome. You must all come and lunch with me shortly. A *fête champêtre* upon the—what is it you call it?—Lisgard Folly. You will give this kiss to mamma for me, Miss Letty, and tell her I must see her to-morrow—no, the day after, for she will be tired. I will not have any of you young people on that day. I shall wish to talk to her alone about so many things. Will you please to ring for my—that droll conveyance which you call *mouche*—'fly?'—Adieu, Madame Walter; take care of your handsome husband, for I have fallen in

love with him.—Adieu to you, naughty boy.—Now, Sir Richard, if you will give me your arm, by the time we get to the front door, and down these dreadful steps, the *mouche* will be at the door, though he walk slow, as though he had just escaped out of treacle."

As the pair made their way to the hall, at the pace of chief-mourners, Madame de Castellan, to Richard's surprise and joy, began, for the first time, to speak in broken English. "Your mother is very fond of you all," said she; "I hope you are fond of her."

"I hope so indeed, Madame: we should be very ungrateful if we were not."

"That is well, young man. Be good to her, for our mothers are obliged to leave us, you know, long before we go ourselves."

"God forbid, Madame, that we should lose her these many years," answered the baronet fervently.

"Yes, yes; but mind this," answered the old lady testily, as she climbed into the *mouche*, "that if Mistress Forest should want a place—here am I at Belcomb, very glad to receive her. Good-bye."

Sir Richard, thunder-struck, stared at the slowly-departing vehicle like one in a dream. "I never heard such a speech," soliloquised he—"never. Can that old harridan be really calculating upon my mother's death giving her a new lady's-maid? How selfish is extreme old age! I could not have believed it possible. How it would have distressed mamma, could she have heard her. And yet but for that speech, she seemed an affectionate and kindly old creature enough. I have often heard that Frenchwomen have no hearts, but only manners—and I suppose that so it is."



CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE PARTIE QUARRE.

AS Walter had predicted, my lady did not return to Mirk by the evening train, and scarcely under any circumstances could her absence have been more keenly felt. The four young folks at home were by no means so socially comfortable as a partie quarré is proverbially said to be. They felt themselves embarrassed even when all together; but when the couples were left alone, the gentlemen over the dessert, and the ladies in the drawing-room, their position was tenfold more awkward. If they had not been so nearly connected, the one might have taken refuge in conversation about the weather or politics, and the other in books or bonnet-shapes; but one of the many disadvantages of near relationship is, that you are cut off from all havens of that sort. The device is too transparent to be adopted or acquiesced in—each was conscious that the other was thinking of all sorts of unpleasant things, and wishing his companion at Jericho—or York at least. The temperature was so mild that there was not even a fire to poke.

“ You remember this claret, Walter, I dare say.”

“ Yes; did not our father reckon it the next best in his cellar to that of the Comet year ? ” &c., &c.

But it struck them both that an absence of a few days from the Abbey was not likely to produce forgetfulness

upon this particular point more than upon any other. Sir Richard did not venture to propose a cigar in the smoking-room ; they sat on either side of the empty grate making a great pretence of enjoying their wine (which might have been ginger-beer, for any gratification it afforded them) and racking their brains for something to say. At last Walter blurted out with a great show of frankness : “Richard, you were quite right about that fellow Derrick ; I wish I had taken your view of the man ; he has let me in for a good deal of money this Derby.”

“I am sorry for that,” returned the other, with genuine pleasure. “Yes, I knew he was a bad lot. I hope, however, he has now left Mirk for good and all.”

“No ; he’ll come back after Mary Forest, I have no doubt ; and I am afraid I was partly to blame in helping him in that quarter. But he knows what I think of him now.”

“I am glad of it,” said the baronet drily.

“Nice, conciliating, agreeable companion this is,” soliloquised Walter ; “I think I see myself making any second admission of having been wrong where he was right.” His self-humiliation, however, had not been altogether without an object.

“Yes ; I lost a considerable sum—that is, considerable for me—through this gentleman from Cariboo,” continued the captain. “It is all in train for being settled—I am not going to ask you, Richard, for another shilling. I am sure you have been already extremely generous—very much so. But the money can’t be paid for a few months ; and there is one rascal—an infernal Jew fellow—who, instead of replying to my letter, offering him very handsome terms, I am sure, has had the impertinence, I see, to write to mamma.”

“A Jew fellow write to *my* mother !” exclaimed Sir Richard, with an indignant emphasis upon the personal pronoun.

“I am afraid so. I am almost sure I recognise his horrid handwriting upon this envelope.”

He took down one of several letters upon the mantelpiece that had arrived that morning for the mistress of the house, and were awaiting her return.

"You see he knows I'm under age, and he thinks to frighten one's people into immediate payment by threatening all sorts of things which he cannot really put into effect, but which will alarm mamma very much indeed. It's a common trick."

"Oh, indeed ; I am not acquainted with the ways of such people myself. And what is it you propose to do, Walter ?"

"Well, I don't think my mother should see that letter at all. He is not a sort of person—the beggar, you see, spells 'Abbey' without an *e*—for a lady to have anything to do with."

"Nor a gentleman either, as I should think," observed the baronet severely. "But I do not perceive how we can prevent this mischief. You cannot open the letter, nor destroy it, of course."

"No, of course not," assented Walter, though with the air of a person who had only been very recently convinced of the impossibility.

Sir Richard took the objectionable missive between his finger and thumb. *To the Honnerable Lady Lisgard, Mirk Abby, Dalwynch.*

What a deal of trouble this fellow Walter was causing ! Of course, one did not wish one's brother any harm, but what a nice thing it would be if one could get him some appointment in the colonies. New Zealand was said to be very salubrious, and had an excellently conducted church establishment : the last mail, too, had brought home (for the eleventh time) the joyful news that the Maories were finally subjugated.

"A perfect savage," observed Walter, with reference to Mr. Moss Welcher Abrahams.

"And yet with some good points," argued the baronet, his thoughts still lingering in the antipodes.

"I'm hanged if I ever heard of them, then," replied

his brother with irritation. "He's a black-leg and a usurer. I'd never have bet with such an infernal scoundrel, only that he offered me half a point more than the odds."

"Ah," returned Sir Richard, with all the expressiveness that is attributed to the "Ugh" of the North American Indian. "Suppose we join the ladies."

I do not pretend to narrate how Rose and Letty had passed their time since dinner. No grown-up male—with the exception, perhaps, of Mr. Anthony Trollope, whom I have heard ladies say has actually described the thing—can picture the mysteries that take place in the drawing-room before the gentlemen come in. Do they tell stories, I wonder, like the folks in the dining-room? Now and then something incidentally crops up which induces me to think they do; but there is no absolute proof. When I was a very little boy, and there chanced to be a dinner-party at home, after having had my half-glass of wine—"up to the cut," I remember, was the niggardly phrase—it was my invariable custom to leave the dining-room when the ladies did; and well I recollect how my elder brother used playfully to flick my unprotected legs with his dinner-napkin, as I closed the petticoated procession. But memory often retains what is least worth keeping, and loses that which is truly valuable. If I had only known that it would be my future mission to write stories, I should doubtless have not so neglected my opportunities in the drawing-room. But at that time I looked forward to be a merchant engaged in the diamond business, and realising thousands of purses of sequins by traffic with the natives of Bagdad and Bassorah. Indeed, upon these very after-dinner occasions I used to be taken upon somebody's lap, and entertained with anecdotes of that charming profession, the members of which were exposed to no vulgar bankruptcies; but if they escaped from the mighty Roc (which was a bird) and from the loadstone island (which drew all the nails out of their argosies), were

certain to live happy ever afterwards with some beautiful princess, who did not scorn to ally herself with trade. Alas! the tongue is withered now that spoke such magic, and the kind hand that fondled my childish curls is dissolved in dust; and it is like enough that all the rest of the gay company is dead except that little boy. No; I remember nothing of it, except that the older ladies, and especially the married ones, used to herd together, and interchange what I took to be secret and important communications; and that the young ones seemed to get after a while a little tired of one another (notwithstanding that they were particularly civil and affectionate), and turned expectant glances toward the door.

They could not, however, have been more pleased to see the gentlemen than Rose and Letty were upon that evening in Mirk drawing-room to welcome the two brothers. Much as women are praised for their superior tact, it is my humble opinion that they possess less of it than ourselves. Their gentleness, beauty, and general attractiveness enable them, it is true, to render certain rough places tolerably smooth—nay, some almost impregnable passes very practicable; but considering their great advantages, they often signally fail in a piece of social engineering, the difficulties of which almost any man would have managed to evade. They prefer cutting a tunnel through granite to deviating a hairbreadth from the line they have marked out for themselves. How often has one sat on tenter-hooks, listening to a woman who raises a domestic breeze to storm, when anybody but herself (who has yet been married to the man a score of years) can perceive both drum and cone mast-high in her husband's face and manner; ay, when you, the spectator, have marked half-a-dozen openings—only she *will* charge with her head down in that foolish manner—by which she could have approached her consort's heart in the course of discussion, and got all she wanted, and yet let him keep his temper. When a *man*

happens to have some feminine gifts, tenderness, grace, beauty—like Walter Lisgard, for instance—what power of pleasing, what avoidance of all subjects of displeasure, he almost always exhibits, notwithstanding his masculine selfishness. It is very possible, indeed, that this young dragoon may not have captivated my readers ; but that is because it is not possible to convey, by any description, the attributes which make such a man so popular. Men talk of the nameless charm that hangs about some fair one, her unspeakably winning manners, and the grace “beyond expression” that pervades her being ; but the influence of such a charmer is almost entirely confined to the other sex. She cannot compel adoration from her young-lady friends : not solely because she is their successful rival, but partly because she does not possess the art of winning them. She has not the tact to conceal her superiority, to conciliate their prejudices, to win their friendship. Now, Walter Lisgard, who was of course adored by women, was almost as popular with men. There were half-a-dozen or so of people — among whom were Ralph Derrick and Arthur Haldane—who had seen him under circumstances of extreme annoyance, and had been disenchanted of the smiling, kindly boy. There was Sir Richard too—but there were reasons enough why Walter should not possess his brother’s good-will, and having failed to win it, it was the nature of such a man to be embarrassed in his presence. Dislike, nay, even want of appreciation, will often paralyse the most agreeable of our fellow-creatures, and make them duller than those who are at all times equally tedious. But if Walter had been in Rose’s place, I think he would have managed to get on better than she did in that *tête-à-tête* with her peccant sister-in-law. No woman can conceal her annoyance from its object, if that be a person of her own sex ; she can only be desperately civil.

At all events, husband and brother were received by these two young ladies as though they had been their

lovers ; and then the tea came up, itself a diversion, which they prolonged to an inordinate limit. Who is so fortunate that he has never been compelled to tea against time ! The dinner-hour at the Abbey, however, in consonance with ancient county habits, was a somewhat early one—six o'clock—and there was a considerable amount of evening to be got through. Sir Richard, in these terrible straits, proposed a game at whist, and the four accordingly sat down at the velvet card-table—scarcely ever used at Mirk—the gentlemen to contend for shilling points, and the ladies for postage-stamps. Mr. Charles Lamb has informed us that he is inclined to think that there *may* be such a thing as *sick whist*; and if that admirable humorist had witnessed this particular rubber, he would have had his suspicions confirmed. Poor Walter thought grimly of his last experience in that way with the *Landrails*, and could not help making an estimate of how many cycles of years it would take him, with average luck, to win back the money lost upon that occasion at the present stakes. Immersed in this calculation, he made a series of infamous blunders, for which Letty, who was, of course, his partner, reproved him with that unsparing severity which this delightful science induces even in an angelic partner : it is at the whist-table that the trodden worm will turn with the most energetic writhings. Sir Richard, on the other hand (who scarcely ever ventured upon any finesse except that of Ace, Queen,) was put in the highest spirits, and became as offensively triumphant as his chivalric nature would permit. Rose, poor girl, sincerely bewailed her husband's vanishing shillings, of which she knew he had no superfluity, and would have trumped her partner's best card half-a-dozen times over, had she but dared. Altogether, it was the dreariest of domestic evenings.

The morning that followed was not much better ; and never did mother receive a sincerer welcome from her offspring than did Lady Lisgard upon her return. The

love-light danced in her eyes for a little at their genuine enthusiasm, but it soon died out, and they all observed how tired and worn she looked, how much more white and wan than when she had started from home. If Sir Richard had had the opportunity, I almost think he would have now acted upon his brother's suggestion, and spared his mother the sight of Mr. Moss Abrahams' letter. But it was too late. Letty had herself taken possession of it : and when the first greetings were over, and all had had their say about the visitor of the day before, she put it into her mother's hand along with the other missives.

"I don't know who your correspondents may be, dear mamma, but I should recommend one of them to apply to that gentleman who promises in the *Times* newspaper to teach everybody a legible hand for four-and-sixpence ; and when he has done that, he might learn a little spelling, such as *A, b, ab*; *b, e, y, bey—Abbey.*"

"I dare say it will wait till I go up stairs," said my lady with a faint smile ; and she did not even look at it. Nay, when she had reached her room, and was alone with her maid, although she turned the letter round and round with hurried, anxious fingers, she did not open it even then, but gave it to Mistress Forest, saying piteously ; "I am not sure about the handwriting. Is it his, or no, Mary ?"

"It is not his, Madam."

"Thank Heaven for that !" cried my lady, breaking the vulgar, sprawling seal, and rapidly possessing herself of the contents. "More trouble," sighed she. "And yet, why should I sigh? this is only another reason to add to the budget in yonder desk for what I am about to do."

"That is well, dear Madam, and bravely said," answered the waiting-maid. "It is no use to court delay. Sooner or later, the blow must fall ; if not to-day, then to-morrow. If he does not write, be sure, my lady, that he will come himself ; we must make up our minds

for that. He cannot go to Coveton, and see my father—which is what I feel he intends to do—without discovering all; and since that must be, the sooner he does so the better. We are now prepared for the worst—for everything, in short, except suspense."

"That is true," returned my lady wearily. "Heaven help us!"

"Amen!" exclaimed Mistress Forest encouragingly; "and I both hope and believe it will."





CHAPTER XXIX.

A JOURNEY ON FOOT.

SOME men, when crossed or “put out,” take, like Sir Richard Lisgard, to whistling melodies — surely a very mild and harmless form of irritation. Others rap out a thunder-clap of an oath or two, which leaves their firmament as serene as ever. Nothing, again, can calm the wrath of some folks but pedestrian exercise ; ghost-wise, they take to “walking,” and gradually their angry passions exude. This last was the case with Mr. Ralph Derrick, Mariner and Gold-digger. When deeply annoyed, and some exceptional barrier existed to his throwing the weightiest substance that happened to be at hand at the head of his enemy, or burying some lethal weapon in his vitals, Ralph took to walking like the Wandering Jew. With the first stage or two, his thoughts were busy with the insult, real or imaginary, which had been put upon him ; his teeth were set, his fingers clenched, his brows were corrugated ; then he began to swing his loaded stick, not viciously, but after the manner of an Irishman at a fair ; and eventually that calisthenic exercise, combined with the healthy influence of fresh air, restored him to that normal state of devil-may-care, which persons of charity go so far as to term, in folks of the like description, good-humour. Of course, one cannot help pitying this poor fellow, for he is one of those

persons who always look much better on paper than in real life, just the reverse of which is the case with the Walter Lisgards ; but as a matter of fact, he is not only a “rough customer,” but a very dangerous and reckless man. Because we have seen him behave towards that graceless captain of dragoons in a very generous and high-flown manner, it is not to be supposed that he was always capable of magnanimous actions. That young gentleman had been his pet, and it had suited his mood to spoil him. A man may not only be agreeable to an individual or two, but an excellent father, or a pattern husband, and yet be a most offensive fellow-creature to you and to me. But it was certainly hard upon Ralph that the only man for whom he entertained a genuine affection, should have turned out such an ungrateful scamp. The treatment he had lately received at that young man’s hands, the knavery of Mr. Jack Withers, and the more than suspected collusion of his late comrade, Mr. Blanquette, united to put him out of humour with the world. His previous opinions, as imported from Cariboo, before he met with Walter, that everybody was more or less of a scoundrel, had met with the amplest confirmation. He was more determined to take his own way than ever, and let them look to it that crossed him.

Bitter, indeed, had been his thoughts as he had been borne along with that rabble rout on foot from Epsom Downs. Deceived by those whom he had trusted, insulted by him whom he had loved, and robbed of three-fourths of that wealth, to which he now ascribed a greater importance than ever, as the *summum bonum*, and indeed the *only* good thing that was worth gaining, he had but stopped in London a sufficient time to pack up his scanty wardrobe, then started off again on foot once more, as we have seen. Disgusted with the Turf, as with all else he had recently had to do with, he was now more than ever bent upon leading a new life —not, indeed, in a penitential sense (although some are

so audacious as to aver that it *is* a kind of mortification), but, in other words, to marry. Mistress Forest was as fond of him, he thought, and with some justice, as any woman was ever likely to be; and he was resolved not to be balked of her by the machinations of Sir Richard Lisgard, or the cajolements of his mother. After the payment of all his bets, he would yet have left a sum that to one in Mary's position would seem considerable; for he could sell *Many Laws*, after his recent performance, for a great deal of money, to the half of which he rather suspected Mr. Blanquette would never venture to lay claim. Yes; he would go down to the place where she had told him her father still dwelt, and would dazzle him with such offers as could scarcely fail to induce him to add the weight of his authority to his own proposals; and there being no particular hurry about the matter, and, as I have said, walking being consonant to his feelings when in wrath, Ralph Derrick had taken the road to Coveton on foot.

It was a long distance, and would have involved several days of such travel, under any circumstances, and he did not hurry himself at all. At many a wayside inn, where he stopped to drink, and found the landlord given that way, and to be good company, he stayed for the day and night, and even longer. And often he left the high-road, and took those short-cuts across country which, like "raw haste," are generally "half-sisters to delay." This was especially the case when he began to draw near the sea. Those who have passed much of their time upon that element (voluntarily), the roar of ocean attracts as the trumpet-blast the *quondam* charger, and mile after mile did Derrick stride along the cliff-top whenever it was practicable, and by the shore, notwithstanding that his indulgence in that fancy doubled his journey. When we are out of humour with our fellow-creatures, the external aspects of nature, even though we be no poets, have often a special attraction for us; the winds of spring—since as much has been said of those of winter—are

certainly not so unkind as man's ingratitude, and we bid them blow with a sort of soothing scorn ; nor does the blue spring sky bite half so nigh as benefits forgot. It pleased Ralph Derrick to let it do its worst, and, rain or shine, he never sought shelter save when he needed drink or rest ; and during this last part of his travel, he obtained them as often at some humble farmhouse as at an inn. The simple folks, who stared at his great beard, and wondered why he did not show them what goods he had in his knapsack, like any other pedlar, pleased him hugely ; and when some newly-soaped and carefully-brushed bashful child would steal into his humble dining-chamber —which was the guidwife's invariable plan of getting her dues settled, since we cannot charge for things, you know (and especially brandy), without a license—he would take the little creature upon his knee, and give him or her his newest shilling, in addition to what was always a liberal settlement of the account. Perhaps he was practising that *rôle* of Paterfamilias which he hoped to be soon called upon to play. At all events, Ralph was by this time in high spirits ; and when he was told that Coveton lay not above a dozen miles ahead of him even by the coast-line, he threw his cudgel into the air, and shouted a wild fragment of a digger's song, to the consternation of his rustic informant.

His way lay now over a great waste of moorland, elastic to the tread, and over which the wind swept almost as unresisted as on the ocean from whence it came. Here and there, it whistled through a bare thorn, but what few trees there were had hidden themselves in sunken hollows, and stood therein, huddled together, with only their shivering tops above the surface. Nothing was to be seen inland save “a level waste of rounded gray,” broken now and again by a church spire or a scattered hamlet ; but the seaward view was very fine. From that moorland height, you looked upon two fair islands spread liked a raised map, beneath, with every hut and quarry distinctly plain, and the small white light-house standing out on its little

hill like a child's toy upon its pedestal. How picturesque and sequestered they looked : how like two miniature but independent worlds, to either of which a man who had had enough and to spare of the turmoil of life might retire with some fitting mate, and peacefully end his days. Surely, thought Ralph, he had somewhere seen those two same islands before ! As he stood at gaze, his thoughts went wandering over archipelagoes of garden-ground in tropic seas ; over rocky islets sawn from iron-bound coasts by the jagged waves ; and over mounds of sand, which the ocean had thrust back into the jaws of rivers, and suffered man to call them land, and dwell there. But these were none of those. As he went on more slowly, searching through the long gallery of his mind for the picture which he knew was there, and half bewildered by the shifting scenes, he was startled by a noise like distant thunder. The sky was almost without a cloud, and the sea, although running high, and dashing with pettish screech against the cliffs, was not so rough but that the fishing-smacks, of which there was quite a fleet in motion, carried all sail : moreover, the thunderous sound was not upon the seaward side, but inland. A few score rapid strides in that direction made its source apparent. An enormous hole, like half-a-dozen gravel-pits in one, but deep as a mine, was gaping there ; and at the bottom, whither it had tunnelled through years of patient unremitting toil, lay the churning sea. It was a gruesome sight to mark the solid earth—just where a peaceful corn-field met the moorland—thus invaded by its insidious foe, whose horrid paean seemed to have something of malicious greed as well as exultation in it, as though it lusted to eat the heart of the round world itself away, after the same manner. “The Devil's Cauldron !” exclaimed Ralph excitedly, and then looked round him with a half-shudder, as though he had repeated the statement out of deference to a great local authority, rather than initiated it of his own free-will. Yes, such was the name by which the place was known ; he felt certain of that

fact ; but unless in sober seriousness H. S. M. himself had whispered the information, how did he ever come to be aware of it ? He had certainly never been there before, in all his life ; it was impossible, having once seen it, to have forgotten so abnormal as well as tremendous a scene.

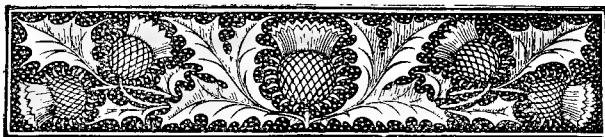
True, there are pits and holes in many cliffs a few yards from their edge which reach like shafts in a tunnel down to the sea ; but the distance of this place from the shore might be measured by furlongs, and the pit was so large that it almost resembled a land-locked bay. A cauldron it might well be called, where the black waters were seething and boiling even now, while in storm-time there would be such wild work as no mere witches could raise, but only the fiend himself, their master.

Did the mad waves, finding themselves thus imprisoned, ever leap up ? Yes : now he remembered all. Thirty years ago, last autumn, he had seen those islands once before from shipboard, and had had them in view for a whole day. The wind, which was dead against the vessel, had kept her off and on that dangerous coast, and eventually risen to storm, and sunk her with all on board save him alone. The last time he had seen that little light-house, it had flashed in vain its fiery warning through sheets of blinding foam. The captain had told him, hours before, what sort of shore awaited them, if ever the *North Star* should be driven upon those pitiless cliffs, on which Derrick himself was now standing ; and, in particular, he had mentioned the Devil's Cauldron, which was spouting foam yonder, he said, like Leviathan, a quarter of a mile inland over the standing corn.

Ralph lay down at full length upon the thymy moor, and peered over the brink of the abyss with earnest gaze, as though he could fathom its dark depths, and mark what lay beneath them. Then rising, with a sigh, he wandered on, no longer with springy tread, until presently the cliff-top

became dotted with white verandaed houses, looking down upon a little bay, that ran up into the land between steep banks, well clothed with trees and shrubs ; whereby he knew that he had come to his journey's end, and that this must needs be Coveton.





CHAPTER XXX.

COVETON.

OVETON—well known to ancient couples who took their first honeymoons half a century ago—is one of those old fashioned sea-side places that resolutely refuse to be “improved,” and the denizens of which affect to speak of Brighton as Brighthelmstone, and to treat it as a rival upon equal terms. It has two very pretty inns, but there is so little competition between them, that there is a shrewd suspicion that they are under the same management; a few more houses have been built, it is true, within the last half century, but they are all constructed upon the same principle of fancy architecture, adopted at Coveton from the first, and which perhaps I may term the Lowther Arcadian. At least I am sure that the models of all its dwelling-houses are to be found in that respectable metropolitan emporium: weather indicators, built for the accommodation of an unencumbered couple; churches for the dressing-table, in the front elevation of which you hang your watch before retiring to rest; villa residences, down whose chimneys you drop half-pence (or half-crowns, if you are so minded), for the encouragement of missionary enterprise; and gritty erections for all sorts of ingenious purposes, but which to the uninstructed suggest only the means of lighting a cigar-match. You have no idea, unless you have been to Coveton, how odd is the

effect of a real village to the construction of which these Lowther Arcadian principles have been applied ; where the doctors, father and son, live in a weather indicator (only, of course, about five hundred times as big), and the former keeps indoors when it is wet, and the son goes out in all weathers ; where a genuine clergyman lives in a magnified money-box, and you look up involuntarily at the upper windows, in the expectation of seeing *Help the Heathen* running in a neat scroll beneath the first and second floors ; and where the gritty church has a real clock in the very place where the hole was left in the model. The whole place looks, in short, as though some clever child had built it out of a box of fancy bricks, after the pattern of what he had seen on nursery mantelpieces, or suspended from Christmas-trees.

Not only is the place old-fashioned in itself, and resolute to resist innovation, but the modern conveniences, which some enthusiasts have endeavoured to import thither, have suffered by the unnatural coalition. A branch railway, for instance, has been attached to this Sleepy Hollow from a great trunk-line ; but the only result is that the railway has become demoralised, and ceased to perform its functions. It goes no faster than the four-horse coach, which still continues to run between Coveton and the nearest provincial town ; it is very uncertain in its times of arrival and departure, and prone to delay, for with old-fashioned gallantry, its trains never fail to stop to pick up a lady, if she does but wave her parasol, no matter whether there is a station on the spot or not. As to the supply of luxuries, or even necessaries, the railway has been a total failure, and there is just the same difficulty in obtaining a sufficiency of food in Coveton as in the good old times—immortalised in a wood-cut at the top of the bills of the *Royal Marine Hotel*—when his Royal Highness the Duke of Kent arrived there in a carriage-and-four with outriders, and left a famine in the flattered hamlet behind him, after a residence of forty-eight hours. The most artful London

bargainer who should take lodgings in Coveton, and attempt to do her own housekeeping, would infallibly fail to procure sustenance for herself and family. Nobody but a native can be certain, for instance, of securing a joint of meat. You have literally to "get up early," if your ambition extends to anything of that kind. By 9 o'clock A.M. the butcher's shop—the facsimile of those which are sold in the Lowther Arcade for children to play at "going to market" with—has disposed of its single sheep, which lies dismembered and ticketed with the names of its several purchasers, thus: *Miss Robinson's leg; Mrs. Captain Cooper's shoulder; the Rev. Jones' kidneys;* and so on. No sheep will be killed again till Saturday next. Beef is only to be looked for once a fortnight. Veal is an accident not to be counted upon at all. Game—you might just as well ask for Bird's-nest soup; and all the fish that is ever caught at Coveton goes as direct as the poor shambling dawdling railway can take it to the great metropolis.

If you stay at either of the hotels, you will not indeed be starved, because one half of the above-mentioned sheep is always divided between those two establishments; but you will not find any more variety. They are principally patronised by newly-married couples, who are too intoxicated with happiness to be very particular about their comfort. There are secluded arbours dotted about the pretty gardens expressly for the accommodation of this class of the community; and when a new arrival does not walk about the place with its arm round its waist (I am speaking of course of that mysterious duality which makes one out of two people), it walks about, hand in hand, like grown-up children. Nobody minds, in this little village, where honeymooning is the normal state of visitors, and discreet behaviour the exception. Coveton itself, though on a small scale, is lovely, and naturally attracts these unsophisticated couples as to another Eden; there are a hundred winding walks—with rather abrupt turnings, however, which I

have heard objected to as bringing folks face to face unexpectedly upon other folks who are already in that position—and seats provided at the local expense, commanding most exquisite views of the sea at all times, and of the moon when there happens to be one ; and I do not doubt that as pleasant hours have been spent at Coveton as at any other place of its age and size within the four seas. I do not, however, recommend any middle-aged person, who has lost his taste for the mere vanities of life, and is particular about having cucumber with his salmon, to put up at either the *Royal Marine Hotel* at Coveton, or the other. They are both perfectly clean, it is true, but cleanliness is not everything, or else we should all go to prison, or endeavour to obtain situations from the Trinity House as supernumeraries in lighthouses. It is not pleasant to have one's bed and board in *one* (the mattresses of the *R. H. M.* indeed, I think, are of cast iron) ; and when one does bring a bit of fish with one from town, one does not like it to be boiled in saltpetre, through a misunderstanding connected with cooling one's champagne with the best substitute for ice.

However, Mr. Ralph Derrick, who patronised this particular establishment, found, for his part, nothing to complain of, except that its half-pints of brandy were exceptionally small ; he therefore ordered a second after his dinner, and inquired of the waiter who brought it where Jacob Forest lived, and which was the nearest way of getting to his cottage.

“Jacob Forest, Sir ; yes, Sir. You don't mean *William* Forest, perhaps, Sir ?” answered the waiter, gently whisking his napkin like a horse's tail, and with an air of patronage in his tone, as though he would say : “I am very well aware you have made a mistake, so I do not hesitate to own it.”

“No, I don't mean William Forest, nor yet Nebuchadnezzar Forest, nor Beelzebub Forest, if those names happen to run in the family,” rejoined Derrick impatiently. “I mean simply Jacob Forest.”

"Beg pardon, Sir, I'm sure, Sir. But such an exceedingly old person, and so seldom inquired after ; whereas, you see, William, he's a boat or two to let ; and if you are anything in the shell or fossil line, he's quite an authority.—Mr. Jacob's cottage, Sir ? Well, Sir, the fact is, he has not lived in what you call a cottage for a long time. He has had a snug little house of his own, ever since my Lady Lisgard— But you know all about that story, I dare say, Sir ?"

"Yes, yes," answered Derrick drily ; for the very name of Lisgard had grown distasteful to him, and particularly in connection with his intended wife. "I know that Jacob's daughter has a very kind mistress—very ; in fact, that she will never part with such a treasure of a waiting-maid, if she can help it. But let us get on to the house, if you please, for I want to call there to-night, and it is even now growing rather dark."

"Yes, Sir ; it is, Sir. I am sorry that the dinner was so unavoidably delayed. The last train and the last coach having come in, we did not expect any more gentry this afternoon, or would have made preparation. But the fact is, Sir, there is no hurry with respect to Mr. Forest. You will find him abed now, and you will find him no more than that two hours hence, for poor old Jacob is bed-ridden. Very cheerful though, I hear, and would like a chat and a glass of grog with any gentleman like yourself, no matter what time it was ; and if you will permit me to advise, you will wait till the moon is up ; for the path across the Cove is not easy to find after dusk ; and then there's the churchyard, which, somehow, one always dislikes — at least I know *I* do — to pass through latish, unless one can see one's way pretty well ; and after that, there's a bit of a spinney before you get to the old man's house ; so although you can see it at top of the hill yonder from this window—there it is, the white house with a thatched roof—you may judge that it is a good long step."

"I see," said Derrick, nodding. "Then I shall light

my pipe, and stroll down to the sea-shore until the moon rises, if you're sure that the old man will see me at so late an hour."

"I am quite sure, Sir ; it will please him above all things, for he complains he gets no sleep of nights, to speak of. You will go down to the Cove, of course ; that's what all our gentry does when there is a moon ; and I shall sit up for you till you come back—although our hour for closing *is* eleven, Sir, sharp."

"Thank you, my man," said Derrick, "do so ;" and lighting his pipe, he strolled down thoughtfully towards the shore.

It was dark enough in the wooded Cove, although the trees were as yet but scantily clothed in their spring garments ; but ever and anon, at a turn of the winding path, he came to some open spot artistically left there, where the darkling sea lay stretched before him, waiting for her tiring-maid the moon to clasp her jewels on. Even thus unadorned, she showed divinely fair as her bosom rose and fell unstirred by passion, for the winds had lulled since sundown, and her gentle breath came up to him in even beats. How different must she have looked from hence, thought he, upon that night of storm which he had expected to be his last. The gale was taking them inshore, when the vessel sprung her leak ; and doubtless many a fellow-passenger of his had reached this coast, perchance this very Cove, although not with life. Oh, treacherous sea ! you that can smile and smile, and break into ten thousand smiles, and make such dainty music on the pebbly shore, who can believe how cruel your wrath can be, that has not seen you tear man's floating home to fragments, andwhelm him with his dear ones in your gaping depths ?

Ralph shuddered, and passed his hand across his brow, as though to erase some terrible thought within it. The silent sky, crossed by those swift and secret messengers the clouds, has doubtless a lesson for man's heart, which it would be well if he would more often study ; but

even Mr. Ruskin, the great self-elected authority upon the subject, must acknowledge that there are physical difficulties at the outset of this particular system of spiritual education. Setting aside the fact, that it is only eagles which can gaze upon the sun with undazzled eyes, the human vertebra is not fitted for any prolonged investigation of the firmament; and if one lies on one's back—I don't know whether I am singular in this apprehension, but I am always afraid of some heavenly body slipping out of space, and dropping upon one while in that exposed position. But everybody can look upon the sea (from the vantage-ground at least of the solid earth), and that is the next best page of nature to the sky. There is something in its monotonous expanse which strikes most of us, especially when we watch it alone and at night, with mysterious, and perhaps religious awe. At all events, it reminds us, if there be any materials for reflection within us, of the brevity of our span of life, and of the littleness of its aims ; a visible eternity seeming to lie before us, in the presence of which we are humbled. Under ordinary circumstances, it was not likely that Derrick should experience these feelings, for sea-faring folks, in spite of what has been written of those who do their business in great waters, are least of all men subject to such influences : but not only, as we have heard him tell Lady Lisgard, did the sea at all times show to him like one great grave, ever since it had engulfed his Lucy, but upon this occasion he was regarding it at the very spot, or near it, where the catastrophe had occurred. Thus, though the moon had risen by this time, and bathed the deep, as all things else on which it shone, in unutterable calm, Ralph's mental vision beheld waves mountains high, and one fair fragile form, now lifted on their foaming tops, now buried in their raging depths, but always dead and drowned.

"Sorry to disturb you, Sir, but will you favour me with half a pipeful of baccy ?" inquired a cheerful voice at his elbow. "Seeing you was alone, and without your young woman—which is rare in these parts," continued the

stranger, evidently one of the fishing community of the place, for notwithstanding the fineness of the night, he was attired in waterproof overalls—"I made bold, fellow-smokers being always ready to help one another in that way, if in no other.—Thank you, Sir. That will save me going to the inn to-night, a visit my missis don't approve of."

"Is *that* the inn?" inquired Derrick, pointing to a little low-roofed cottage just at the entrance to the Cove, and only raised a few feet above high-water mark.

"No, Sir; that's my own little place, William Forest, at your service. If you happen to be in want of a boat, or one as can show you where to find the fossils and such like, I can do that as well as any man in Coveton, let him be who he will."

"Then you are old Jacob Forest's nephew, I suppose, for he had no son, and only one daughter, had he?"

"Just so, Sir; my Cousin Mary. A precious lucky woman she is. It was through her I came to have the cottage, for my uncle made it over to me when he moved to the grand house on the hill yonder, as my Lady Lisgard gave to him. God bless her ladyship, and good Sir Robert too, though he's gone to heaven by this time, and don't want none of our wishes."

"Yes, yes," answered Derrick, with irritation; "you Coveton folks can talk of nothing but these Lisgards. Now, just dismiss them from your mind while you answer a question I am going to ask you. You are old enough to remember that terrible storm which took place here in the September of '32, are you not?"

"Yes, Sir, yes. And none of us that saw it is ever likely to forget it. That was the very time when old Sir Robert—"

"Damn Sir Robert!" interrupted Ralph with energy. "If you would only be so kind as to forget that respectable baronet, and all belonging to him, while you answer me a simple question, I shall be greatly obliged to you. Forgive me, mate—but my temper is not so good as my

tobacco. Pray, take another pipeful. Now, after that same storm in which the *North Star*—that was the name of the ship, was it not?—was lost yonder, were there many bodies washed ashore about here?"

"Dead uns, you mean, Sir, of course?" answered the man, hesitatingly. "Well, yes, there was. I should think, taking them altogether, for they came in, some of them, weeks afterwards, I should think there was a dozen or more; many of them lashed to spars, poor things. But it was no use."

"And where were these unfortunate creatures put to?" inquired Derrick after a pause.

"They were all buried in the churchyard yonder, Sir. Sir Robert Lisgard—but there, I forgot: you may read some of their names—those at least as was identified—upon the tombstones. It was a sad sight them burials. Strangers, and very poor folks mostly, coming from miles and miles away to see their dead, who had but left home a few days before for a New World, indeed, as they call it, but little thinking as it was for *that*. You should hear Uncle Jacob talk of it."

"Ah, sad, indeed," echoed Derrick, rising from his seat. "I am glad to have met *you*, mate; good-night, and thank you."

"Thank you, Sir; I never tasted better baccy."

Derrick waited until his companion had descended to the very bottom of the Cove; waited until he saw the cottage door open and shut—a mere streak of light and shadow—and then followed on his steps; but having reached the foot of the ravine, he took the winding path that led up its opposite side towards the church and Jacob Forest's high-built dwelling.



CHAPTER XXXI.

THE MEMORIAL WINDOW.

NO TWITHSTANDING that Coveton Church is “gritty,” like all the rest of the architecture in that locality, and presents the appearance of an ecclesiastical edifice swathed in sand-paper, it is by no means unpicturesque ; while the spot on which it stands can compare for beauty with any God’s acre in England. It is more than a hundred feet above the level of the village, and commands a glorious view, which would be a complete panorama, but for the steep wooded hill, which protects it from the bitter north, and assists the genial climate to make a flower-garden of the church-yard three parts of the year round. Even thus early in the summer, had Ralph’s visit been paid in the daytime instead of the night, he would have seen it bright with bud and blossom, for almost every grave was itself a little parterre, tended by pious hands. Poor wasted human forms, but not seldom dearer to others than the handsomest and healthiest, often come to Coveton to prolong for a little their painful lives, until they flit away like shadows ; indeed, if you read the grave-stones, you will find three out of four are records of departed youth. The newly married pass their honeymoons at the pleasant little village, and those who have been sentenced to death by the doctors come also thither, and a strange and touching contrast they afford.

The low large moon was flooding the sacred place with its soft radiance, so that the inscriptions were as plain to be seen as in broad noonday. From knoll to knoll, each roofing sacred dust, Ralph wandered, not unmoved ; for he too had lost a dear one by untimely death, and even now was looking for the place where haply she might lie. He would have felt it in some sort a comfort to know that her bones rested beneath the rounded turf, rather than in yonder shifting deep, although, beyond the wooded village with its scattered lights, it lay as motionless at present as a silver pall. No less than thrice, he came upon the tombs of those with whom he had been a fellow-passenger on board that doomed ship so many years ago. Time had done its work with these, and they were not easily deciphered ; but he carefully spelled them out—*John Robins, mate of the North Star, which foundered at sea on the night of September 14, 1832.* Poor Robins ! Ralph remembered him very well. They had been fellow-townsmen together at Bleamouth, a circumstance which had troubled him at first, sailing as he did under a feigned name ; but they had met but once before, and the mate had, as it turned out, no remembrance of him. But Ralph well remembered what uneasiness the possibility of recognition had given him at the time, for it might have been supposed that he had committed some disgraceful crime, which would cause him, and what was worse, his wife and the Meades, to be looked upon askance throughout the voyage. But what did it matter now ? What had anything mattered to that great ship's company, so full of plans and projects for beginning life afresh under other skies ? Death had made sudden and swift provision for them all.—*Sarah Sutton, aged 69, and Henry, her son. The bodies of his four children, and of Helen, his wife, who perished in the same storm, never came to shore.* Ralph remembered the gaunt, strong old woman, who did not hesitate, within a year of man's allotted span, to cross the ocean ; she and her son were as like as difference of age and sex could permit of likeness ; but the children, like

the wife, were delicate and sickly. It seemed somehow fitting enough that these two, though dead, should have come to land ; while the others, poor things, should have succumbed to the stormy deep. The third inscription was even a more remarkable one. Upon a huge recumbent slab, which evidently roofed the remains of more than one person, were engraved these words : *Beneath this stone are laid the bones of those who were washed on shore from the wreck of the North Star, but whose remains, from lapse of time, or other causes, have not been identified. "Requiescat in pace."*

A nameless grave, indeed, with not even the number or the sex of its unfortunate inmates specified ! The slab bore the date of but a week or two subsequent to the catastrophe, yet spoke “of lapse of time.” How impossible, therefore, to discover *now* whose bones had mouldered beneath it into dust. His Lucy might be there, or she might not. It was one of the few tombs that exhibited no trace of care ; but a tuft of violets, the sweet breath of which betrayed them, chanced to be growing at the edge of it, and Derrick plucked them and placed them in his bosom. He seemed to feel certain now that she had come ashore *somewhere* ; and why not here ? How solemn and still it was ! The very air, though odorous and fresh, seemed full of the presence of the dead ; and Ralph’s thoughts were with them, so that he quite forgot the purpose with which he had visited the little village, light after light in which was being quenched beneath him, for it was growing late.

Was it likely that there would be any record of the perished crew in the church itself ? They had almost all been in humble circumstances, being emigrants, and therefore it was not probable that any such costly memorial should have been erected ; but still it was just possible. The oaken door, studded with iron nails, was locked, and also a small postern that led into a diminutive vestry, an offshoot of the main building. The windows, too, were fastened on the inside, or gave no promise of opening,

either in hinge or handle ; but he climbed up to the sill of one of them, for they were of no great height, and looked in. The church was small, but very neat and pretty, with carved oaken sittings, a handsome double pulpit, and a huge brass lectern, of the use of which the present spectator knew nothing. Ralph had not seen so much of the inside of a church for many a year, and he was fortunate in the specimen thus accidentally submitted to his notice. The wealthy visitors of the place had done their duty, and gratified their taste at the same time, by many a pious offering. A small but splendid organ, with gilded and star-bespangled pipes, adorned the gallery on his left : and immediately in front of him glowed a memorial window. There were other smaller ones, erected, doubtless, in tribute to some of those dear ones who had been laid so prematurely in the graveyard without ; but this was a very large and elaborate specimen of modern art. The designer, in his admiration of the antique, had carefully reproduced every blemish peculiar to an age wherein anatomy was never studied save by doctors, and perspective was utterly unknown. The persons represented were the four evangelists, all in the most gorgeous dyes, and as large as life ; but with their magnitude ceased almost all similarity to the human form divine. Their spines were dislocated, their bones were distorted ; and where a limb was bent, it exhibited a sharp angle, like a broken branch. In the background rose the mountains of Judaea, of the same size and shape as Christmas plum-puddings, with the sun setting luridly in the midst of them, like snapdragon. Ralph, however, was quite of the opinion of the great authorities upon church decoration, and thought this very fine ; he was also perfectly right in coming to the conclusion that such a work of art must have cost somebody a good bit of money. The moonlight streamed in behind him full upon it, and lit up all its splendid hues. Besides the scrolls, with texts upon them, proceeding out of the mouths of these individuals like ribbons from between the lips of a

conjuror at a fair,' there was a gilded inscription underneath the whole, in highly florid and decorated print. In the case of the texts, when you had managed to master the first letter, the deciphering of the rest was, to a person acquainted with the Scriptures, tolerably easy ; though poor Ralph was by no means "edified," and could make nothing of them at all ; but as for the inscription at the base, it looked to him at the first glance as meaningless as the hieroglyphics on a tea-chest.

"Why cannot these good people write what they have to say in plain English ?" thought Derrick irreverently ; "folks as come to church must need to bring a copy-book of alphabets with them. Never in all my life, and I've been among strangely-speaking creatures in my time, did I come upon such queer looking writing ; and yet, one would think, being all in such resplendent hues, it ought to be something worth reading too.—Bless my soul and body, what's this ?"

This last ejaculation was uttered with excessive vehemence, and the excitement of the speaker was such that he could scarce keep his balance on the narrow sill upon which he half knelt, half clung. His hot breath had dimmed the glass, and as he wiped the moisture from it with his handkerchief, his fingers trembled so with agitation that they tapped audibly upon the pane. He glued his face to the window for upwards of a minute, and when he took it away again, it was white as the marble font that gleamed within. Had Ralph Derrick seen a ghost, that he slipped down from that window-sill with such excessive precipitation, and stood beneath it with his hat off, wiping his cold brow ? "Am I awake or dreaming ?" murmured he, striking himself a sounding blow upon the chest. "Was the brandy at yonder inn so strong that it has drugged me ? or has this moonlight, as some hold it does, been stealing away my wits ? or has the subject of my thoughts suggested names of which I had believed no record survived ?" Once more Ralph took his station at the window, and this time did not leave

it till he had not only made himself master, although with pain and difficulty, of that part of the inscription which had so arrested his attention, but had even transferred it, as well as his position permitted, to his pocket-book, word for word :—

In memory of
FRANK MEADE, aged 66,
and
RACHEL, his wife, aged 56,
drowned at sea, Sep. 14, A.D. 1832.
And also of
RALPH GAVESTONE, aged 22,
who perished in the same storm.

Some sacred words were added, but they told him nothing more concerning those three persons, namely, his lost wife's father and mother, and *himself*. Ralph Gavestone, alias Derrick, had been gazing upon his own memorial window, set up to commemorate his death more than thirty years ago !

Who had done it? Who could have had the will to do it? And who the means? And how was it that he and the Meades were associated together upon yonder painted glass, and yet not she who was the only bond between them? Why was not the death of that sweet saint made mention of in a place so fitting for its record, and where his own unworthy name had found admittance; and his real name too—not the one which had stood upon the passenger-list of the *North Star*. Into his perplexed and

wandering mind there came some half-forgotten tale, heard from he knew not whom, of some Scotch laird who, gifted with the second sight, perceives a funeral pass by—the coffin borne by relatives of his, and followed by troops of mourning friends—and marvels that among the woeful crowd he does not recognise himself. Surely, thinks he, he should be there, to show respect to the common friend departed, whom he must have known so well, although he misses no remembered face. Then on a sudden it strikes him that he must himself be *in* the coffin—that it is his own interment of which he is the witness—and his heart fails within him because he feels that he has had his warning, and stands indeed within the shadow of black death. Why Ralph should think of such a tale in such a place may perhaps have been easily accounted for, but once remembered, he applied it with lightning speed to the subject in his mind, only in an inverse sense. The reason why his Lucy's name was not upon that mystic monument, where those of her parents and her husband were glowing in purple and gold, must be that she herself was *alive*. Nay, who upon earth could have wished thus piously to perpetuate their memory except Lucy herself? How she could have had the power to do so, in so splendid and enduring a manner, would have been of itself sufficiently miraculous, but that that circumstance was swallowed up, like Pharaoh's serpents, by the still greater miracle—the fact that she was among the living !

For a moment, a sort of ecstasy seemed to possess this world-wearied wanderer, and all the moonlit scene to assume an aspect altogether strange, such as earth and sea, however beautiful, can only show to the pure and hopeful ; then a sharp thought pierced his brain. She might have been alive when she caused that window to be set up, and yet not now. He knew that those gorgeous dyes kept their bright colours for many a year undimmed : supposing that he allowed five years (in which, by-the-bye, Ralph was very near the truth) as a reasonable time to have elapsed between the shipwreck and the time

that this memorial was erected—and in less time, how was it possible she could have saved the money for such a purpose—that would still leave more than a quarter of a century between its erection and the present time. A quarter of a century! a generation of human life! Time enough to die, to marry—but no, his Lucy would never have done that. This window, showing so tender a regard after such a lapse of years, was evidence in some sort to the contrary; and since he himself had never forgotten her, and only now, after a lonely lifetime, was meditating another marriage, he felt no apprehension upon that score. No; if his Lucy was alive, she was still his, and free to welcome him as of old to her loving arms. The only question with which he had now any real concern was, whether she still lived? Henceforward, it would be his sole business in the world to find this matter out. And first, she must certainly have been washed ashore alive; and somewhere in these parts. Who, then, so fit to give him information upon that point as old Jacob Forest, who had lived at Coveton all his life, and at that time, in the very cottage on the beach where his nephew now resided? So Ralph Derrick (for, like everybody else, we may still continue to call him so) took the path that he had originally intended to take after all, notwithstanding his marvellous discovery, and made straight for Jacob's dwelling on the hill; no longer with the intention of winning a bride, but of recovering a long-lost wife.





CHAPTER XXXII.

JACOB'S GUARD-SHIP.

“**A**HATEVER evils may happen unto me, may Heaven spare my reason,” was the heartfelt prayer of a wise and reverent man. He might have added—for he was one of those who thought it no harm to ask of Him who watches the sparrow’s fall, for particular blessings—“And however I be racked with pain by day, by night may I still enjoy my sleep.” Next to madness, and like enough with some folks to end in that, is the want of rest during that period which should be the season of slumber, and which, if it be not so, is a dread and dreary time indeed. There is many an honest soul in the autumn of life who will protest in the morning, in the course of a very tolerable breakfast, that she has not had a wink of sleep all night, because she has heard a few consecutive hours recorded by the church clock; but to lie awake indeed from eve to morn is not, thank God, a very common experience, and still less often are any of us compelled to endure it night after night for years. To live an existence the converse of the rest of their fellow-creatures is the lot of more than one trade—editors of daily newspapers, for instance, and burglars; but to *work* by night is a very different affair from the lying awake unemployed, but thinking, thinking, while nothing breaks the silence of the muffled

world save the howl of the watch-dog and the weird monotony of the wind. Yet there are some of us doomed to this sad fate, who scarcely know what it is to spend an easeful night, and who snatch their scanty dole of sleep by day.

Poor Jacob Forest was one of these. A long life of reckless exposure to the elements, not, perhaps, unassisted by hard drinking, had brought him to this sad pass. Thanks to his daughter, he wanted for nothing that money could give him ; but the once hale and venturesome mariner was now bedridden and racked at most times, but especially by night, with rheumatic twinges. Mary herself never failed to visit him every summer : and three days out of four some ancient comrade would painfully climb the hill that led to his cosy little house, and hob and nob with him by his bedside. But he was still sadly in want of company during the night-watches ; true, a nurse was paid to minister to his comforts during that season, but she generally "dropped off" into a doze, sooner or later ; and even if she was awake, her gossip was of the tea-and-muffin sort, rather than that description of talk which goes best with hot grog, and was more suitable to a seasoned vessel, though laid up in extraordinary, like old Jacob. Therefore it was, as the waiter at the *Royal Marine* had observed, that visitors calling at ultra-fashionably late hours at the Guard-ship, as it was the proprietor's fancy to term his place of residence, were especially welcome.

The home of this old veteran had been built, at his own request, of wood, notwithstanding the remonstrances of his medical attendant, who ascribed part of his patient's ailments to the fact, that his cottage on the shore had been constructed of that material. But Mr. Forest had insisted upon having his way : next to one's own boat, he had argued, there was nothing like a wooden house to make one feel at home in ; nor could he be moved from that position by the caustic rejoinder, that in that case he might just as well get into his coffin at once. Nay,

the Guard-ship had been made still less air-tight than it otherwise would have been by the ingenious introduction of a hinge running along one side of the old man's bedroom on the ground-floor, the very wall of which, in summer-time, could thereby be lowered flapwise, exposing the whole arrangement of his bower after the manner of the better class of doll's houses. With the eccentricity of taste so often exhibited in the possessors of unexpected wealth, Mr. Forest had "gone in," as the phrase runs, in his prosperous old age, for curious poultry; and up his slanting shutter (exactly as horses are introduced into a railway train) used to be driven from the yard for his immediate inspection, as he lay in bed, every sort of feathered fowl after their kind, as into a poultry ark. The earliness of the season, combined with the lateness of the hour, denied this exhibition (afforded to all visitors whenever practicable) to Ralph Derrick, but the ancient mariner gave him the heartiest of welcomes, as had been predicted. He had heard of Mr. Derrick more than once from Mary, and was exceedingly pleased to do him honour; at which hint the nurse at once set forth the "materials" for a drinking-bout on a little table which stood at the invalid's elbow, and betook herself to an adjoining cabin, where she instantly went to bed with her clothes on. Next to the danger from draughts, to which the captain of the Guard-ship had already succumbed, he lay in nightly peril of perishing by fire, since he smoked in bed almost unceasingly; and in case of a spark igniting where it should not, the whole two-decker would not have taken a quarter of an hour to become a heap of ashes; but this apprehension, as the old woman was glad to think, was groundless upon this occasion, when her master had a gentleman to keep him company, and she left them with an easy conscience to their pipes and grog.

"So I hear you are rather sweet upon my good Mary," observed the old sailor slyly, as soon as they were left alone. "She writes to me more than most girls do to

their fathers, you see, Mr. Derrick, knowing I'm all alone here, and so pleased to hear any news."

"Very right and very proper," returned Ralph quietly, "and a very good girl, as you say, she is, although she is not a very young one."

"Young enough for some folks, at all events—eh, eh, Sir?" chuckled the old man. "Come, come—I know all about you, and what you're come here about; I'm wide awake enough, I can tell you, although I'm abed. You've run down to Coveton, Sir, to 'ask papa.' There, haven't I hit it?"

"Well, the fact is, Mr. Forest, the love seems rather more on my side than hers. I don't deny that I had a great liking for your daughter, but when a man knows that his love is not returned——"

"Eh, eh," interrupted the old salt, pursing his lips and giving his tasselled night-cap a pull upon one side, which gave him an expression of much aimless intelligence; "but I don't understand this. You must have done something, Sir, to forfeit the good opinion of my Mary; for certainly, at one time—— But there, perhaps I'm saying too much. If it aint agreed between you and my Mary, then, may I ask, Sir—not but that I'm uncommon glad to see you, or any other gentleman, from nightfall to anyone of the small-hours, I'm sure—but may I ask what the dickens brings you here?"

"Well, Sir," replied Ralph, forcing a smile, "I happened to find myself in these parts, and did not like to pass by without looking in upon the father of Mary Forest, even though all should be off between us; and, besides, I was told you are the likeliest man to be able to give me some information about the wreck of the *North Star*, which happened about thirty years ago, and the particulars of which, for a reason, I want to know."

"Fill your pipe, then, and mix yourself another glass," cried the old man, delighted to be called upon for his favourite yarn, "for it's a story as you can't tell in a five minutes, nor in ten neither. The ship you speak of, Sir,

was an emigrant vessel of more than a thousand tons, as sailed on September 10, 1832——”

“I know all about the ship,” interrupted Derrick impatiently, “for I had a passage in her myself. I want to hear about the bodies that came on shore.”

“*You* were a passenger by the *North Star?*” ejaculated the old man with amazement. “Why, it was said that every soul on board her perished in the storm in which she went to pieces. *Derrick, Derrick!* Well, now you mention it, I do remember the name, for I used to have that passenger-list by heart. I cut it out of one of the papers at the time, and having been so much concerned in the matter myself, though little knowing that I should owe this house to that same wreck—built out of its very timbers, as I might say—and almost all I have in this world. But you know how all that came about, and what Sir Robert did for me and mine, I dare say, mate?”

“Yes, yes—I have heard something of that. But can you tell me nothing of what came ashore? You have said not a soul was saved; I suppose, then, it was the surviving relatives who put up the gravestones to the memory of the drowned, which I saw as I came through the churchyard?”

“That was just it. There were five men and three women—poor souls—laid under the big stone next the yew-tree; nobody knew who they were. Sir Robert paid for that too, if I remember right—let’s see——”

“I hear of nothing but ‘Sir Robert’ and ‘Sir Robert’ in this village of yours,” interrupted Ralph impatiently. “Nobody has a story to tell in Coveton but manages to bring that man’s name in by head and shoulders. Why the deuce do they do it?”

“Because he’s been the making of the place—that’s why, and because there’s a little gratitude left in our village still, I am glad to say, Sir, although it may have died out in the world,” replied the old sailor firmly. “Why, he not only built the roof that is now sheltering

us, but the village school, and the little pier at the Cove foot that has sheltered many a fishing-smack since the time when my lady——”

“Well, he didn’t put up that great bit of painted glass in the church, I suppose,” broke in Derrick testily, “to the memory of Frank Meade and others, did he? for *that’s* what I want to get at, and nothing else.”

“Did he not? Then who did it, I should like to know?” answered Mr. Forest sarcastically. “Who but himself and my lady; and if it had been the old times as I’ve heard tell of instead of now, there would have been priests paid to pray for their poor souls until this day; ay, that there would. He was never tired of showing his thankfulness for the joy that came to himself, and his pity for the woe that befell others upon that awful night. It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good, they say, and the storm that carried the *North Star* to the bottom with all on board save one—or two, I should now say, since I have no reason to doubt your word, Mr. Derrick——”

“Ay, tell me about the storm,” said Ralph in an altered voice, and with a face grown very white and still. “I will not interrupt you again, I will not indeed. One poor creature came ashore alive, you said?”

“What! do you mean to say my Mary never told you? She must be a good un to keep a secret even from her sweetheart; not that it’s any secret here, however they may treat it at Mirk; and if I didn’t tell you myself, you would hear it from the first man you met in Coveton, and asked how Sir Robert Lisgard got his bride.”

“Just so,” said Derrick in a hoarse whisper; “therefore please to tell me.”

“Then help yourself to grog, mate, for you look cold. Some landlubbers will have it that this room is cold, because of the hinge yonder; but a seafaring chap like you—— There, that should warm you. Well, on the 10th of September 1832, an emigrant ship of more than a thousand tons——”

“A thousand devils!” cried Derrick, starting to his

feet ; “ do you wish to drive me mad ? I tell you I was on board of her myself. Tell me about the woman that came ashore lashed to the spar.”

“ What ! then, you do know about it after all ? ” grumbled the old man, removing his pipe from the corner of his mouth, an action which represented the greatest amount of astonishment of which he was capable. “ Why the deuce did you bother me to spin you the yarn, then ? A man at my time of life aint got much breath to throw away, I can tell you.”

“ How was she dressed ? What had she on ? ” inquired Derrick, upon whose ears his short-winded host’s remonstrance had fallen unheeded.

“ Devilish little,” returned the old fellow gruffly : “ nothing but a petticoat, and what my Mary calls a body—but which I should call a bust—and a sailor’s pea-jacket, and that was not rightly upon her, but tied between her and the spar, to save her dainty limbs, poor girl ; and it is my opinion that he was an honest-hearted chap as put it there, and almost deserved to have her for himself. But there, they were brother and sister, so *that* couldn’t be. Moreover, she couldn’t have got better off than she did, that’s certain. Lord, to think that there poor, friendless, penniless, clotheless creature—as I had thought to be almost lifeless too, when me and Sir Robert dragged her in from the hungry waves—should come to be Lady Lisgard of Mirk Abbey—— What’s the matter with the man ? Hi, nurse, hi ! Confound the woman, how she sleeps ! Where the devil’s my stick ? ”

Mr. Jacob Forest’s temper was hasty, but he had no intention of inflicting corporal punishment on the respectable female who was too deeply plunged in slumber to attend to his cries. He desired his stick in order that he might smite the battered gong that hung at his bedside, and upon which (besides using it as a gentle indication of her presence being required) he was accustomed to execute an imitation of ship’s “ bells ” throughout the watchful night. Before, however, he could lay his

crippled fingers upon the instrument required, Ralph Derrick, who had fallen from his chair upon the carpetless floor, began to recover his senses, and with them his speech.

"Don't be alarmed, Sir—don't call your nurse," said he, gathering himself up; "it is only a sort of fainting-fit to which I am subject—indeed I was born with them."

"And you'll die with them too, some day," thought old Jacob to himself, as he stared with undisguised apprehension at his visitor's white face and shaking limbs. "Don't you think you had better take a little more rum—or stay, perhaps it's that that's done the mischief?"

"No, it's not that," answered Derrick bitterly, as he filled himself a wine-glass of the liquor neat. "I'm better now, and I shan't give way again. But I remember the man that took such care of the woman you speak of, just before the vessel parted; and your mention of it gave me quite a turn. I didn't know he was her brother; but he was much more careful about her safety than his own—God knows."

"Very like," rejoined the old fellow, "and what I should have expected, even if they had not been so near related. She was just the sort of woman that any man worth his salt would be willing to lay down his life for. His Christian name was Ralph, was it not, the same as yours?"

"Yes, it was," answered the other, gravely. "Who was it that told you that? I forgot, though; it is painted in the church-window."

"I found it out myself," continued the old fellow, cunningly, "long before that there memorial window was up; for my lady never talked about it even to Mary. But there was *Ralph Gavestone* written inside the collar of the pea-coat, and I kept it for many a year myself until the moth got in it, because I thought the sight of it might distress the poor lady."

"Women soon get over that sort of thing," said Ralph in a grating voice.

"Well, yes ; sooner or later, I dare say they do. And a very fortunate thing it is, in my opinion, that such is the case. It would be very bad for us all, and particularly for seafaring folk, if we never smiled again because a party as we liked happened to be drowned, like some king of England as my Mary once read about to me when I was down with my first fit of the rheumatiz. Why, *I've* lost a couple of brothers myself in that same way, and very good chaps they were : but why should I make myself wretched because they're gone to heaven ? Take another pipe, man ! Why, you're not going to leave me, surely ?"

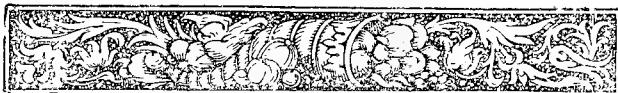
"Yes, I am, Jacob Forest," answered Derrick, gloomily. "I have heard all that I want to know, and more—much more ! If you have any message for your daughter, I'll take it to her. I am going off to Mirk at once."

"You may tell her—but no ; I'll tell her myself, and not trouble you," answered the old fellow hastily, purple at least as much with rage as rum. "I don't wish to be under the slightest obligation to a fellow as looks in upon a poor cripple under pretence of friendship, and then directly he's heard all he wants, and drank all he can, and had one of his fits as he was born with, all as snug as can be—Hi, nurse, hi ! Damme, if the fellow hasn't actually left the front-door open !" And the invalid applied himself to his gong with a fury that would have roused the Seven Sleepers, had they chanced to have been slumbering (let alone taking a nap with their clothes on) in the adjacent room. "Push my table nearer," cried he to his terrified attendant, "and give me paper and pens. Yes, my Mary particularly begged of me to let her know at once in case he called, and I will do so ; but I will also take leave to tell her what a selfish scoundrel, in my opinion, he is ; and I'll mention his alarming fits. If she has found any reason to be dissatisfied with the beggar, I'll give her some more ; and mind, nurse, this is posted before seven o'clock. He shall find

a cool reception at Mirk Abbey, or my name is not Jacob Forest!"

Epistolary composition was not an accomplishment in which the old sailor was an adept, and the mechanical part of the operation was a very slow one with him, by reason of his infirmities ; but nevertheless he managed to indite a missive more or less to his mind, long before the early mail went out from Coveton, and his faithful attendant did his bidding by posting the same.





CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TRIUMPHAL ARCH.

THIS is the morning that immediately precedes Sir Richard's fête-day, and all at the Abbey are as busy as a hive of bees. Mrs. Welsh is engaged in incessant warfare with a "professed cook" of the male sex, who has been imported from town with an army of myrmidons clad in white aprons and head-pieces; and Mr. Roberts carries the key of the cellar about his person as religiously as though it were an amulet, exceedingly regretting that the person who has undertaken to purvey the cold collation to the tenantry does not also furnish the wine. For three shillings or three shillings and sixpence the bottle, he argues, as good a sherry as they have any right to taste might be set before Farmer Beeves and "that sort;" and yet we are about to give them the old "West India," as stood old Sir Robert in sixty shillings a dozen a quarter of a century ago; nay, even four dozen of cob-web port, the age of which is absolutely unknown, have been set aside for the after-dinner tickling of those rough palates, which would as lief or liever (thinks Mr. Roberts) have gin and whisky-punch. The gentlefolks, to be sure, dine with them, but you never catch *them* (Mr. R. has observed) doing much in the way of drink at a three-o'clock dinner in a marquée.

There is to be dancing in the said tent, which has been

boarded for that purpose, later in the evening; and a ball will take place at the Abbey likewise, to which all the "county" has been invited, and perhaps a little more.

It was a difficult matter even for Sir Richard, who had a speciality for such solemn follies, to decide exactly what were "county families" and what were not, and where the imaginary line that divided the ball-room from the marquée was to be laid down. The social difference between the person of the least importance that had the *entrée* of the former, and the person of the greatest importance who was consigned to the latter was, of course, infinitesimally small, and the decision involved all the difficulties with which the theologians afflict themselves concerning the future position of the indifferently Good and the tolerably Bad. What had Mr. Jones, M.R.C.S. of Dalwynch, done that he should be admitted into Paradise, while the crystal bar was obstinately interposed against the entrance of Mr. Jones, M.R.C.S., from the capital of Wheatshire? Nothing of himself, was the baronet's stern decree; but it could be proved beyond cavil that the former was remotely related to the Davey Joneses of Locker Hall, a family of immense antiquity, and distinguished in our naval annals; whereas the latter had no higher connection to boast of than Thomas Jones, J.P. of Allworthy Court (himself only admitted to the higher sphere by reason of a fortunate marriage), and was therefore, as it were, predestined to sit below the salt.

There were, however, some exceptions even to this Draconian system. Dr. Haldane, for instance, was importuned with an earnestness that Sir Richard would never have used to any peer of the realm, to honour this occasion with his presence, and break through his stubborn resolve not to set foot within Mirk Abbey; but the old man, although greatly moved, declined the invitation. Madame de Castellan, too, notwithstanding she was such a new-comer to the county, was called upon at Belcomb

by Sir Richard in person, and though she was not well enough to see him, expressed herself by letter as hugely gratified by the object of his visit ; albeit at the same time she gave him to understand that all festivities were just now distasteful to her, and indeed that she had not the strength for them. “As for his coming of age,” added the old Frenchwoman, “she was not at all sure that such an event was a subject of congratulation, though, if it had been his marriage-day, then indeed she might have come, if it were only to make his young bride jealous.” Besides these two refusals, there was scarcely any. The popularity of the Lisgard family, and the gorgeous scale of the promised entertainment—the engagement of the Coldstream band was ascertained beyond a doubt, and there was a whisper afloat concerning fireworks, and even that the ornamental water was to be illuminated—combined to attract not only everybody who was anybody, but a still vaster throng of nobodies at all. Every inhabitant of Mirk, from the grandparents to the babes in arms, for instance, were invited to take their fill of beef and beer, if their digestion permitted of it, and if not, there was plenty of rich plum-pudding ; for besides the marquée half the park had been put under canvas, in order to make the festivities as much as possible independent of the weather, and presented the appearance of a miniature camp, which would be still more the case upon the morrow, when the scene was enlivened by the uniforms of the “Lisgard’s Own,” as some of the “yellows” had wickedly christened the Mirk Volunteer Corps.

Altogether, there was every reason for Sir Richard’s being in the best of spirits. Master Walter, too, secretly conscious of having been a much worse boy than he was known to be, and feeling that he had met better luck, if not than he deserved, certainly than he could reasonably have expected, was in high feather ; he was deeply grateful to his mother that she had abstained from reproaching him with the contents of the letter written by Mr. Abrahams, the settlement of whose claim she had taken

upon herself ; and he well knew that the most welcome way in which he could show his gratitude would be taking part with a good grace in his brother's triumphal entrance upon his twenty-first birthday.

Rose, who had obtained her ends, as well as full substantial forgiveness (which was all she cared for), for the means employed, and foresaw the prostration of half the young men of the county at her pretty feet upon the morrow, was in excellent humour with herself, and therefore with the world. As for Letty, it is unnecessary to say more than that she felt a measureless content in the society of Mr. Arthur Haldane, who passed all his days just now up at the Abbey, having placed his valuable services entirely at the disposal of Lady Lisgard, and generally found his duties led him into the vicinity of her ladyship's daughter.

His taste for table decoration and floral devices, though newly developed, was really, Letty affirmed, of a very high order, and as she was perpetually appealing to it, there can be no doubt that she believed what she said. All at Mirk Abbey, in short, were, or seemed to be, in a state of pleasurable excitement and joyous expectation, saye its unhappy mistress. In vain, Sir Richard tried to persuade himself that she was only suffering from a feeling of responsibility—apprehensive lest anything should go wrong in the arrangements of the all-important morrow ; in vain, Master Walter endeavoured to pacify his own mind with the thought, that although a part of his mother's anxieties might have been caused by his own misdoings, all trace of them would disappear so soon as she should discover that his intention of divorcing himself from the turf, as well as all other kinds of gambling, was as sincere as it really was.

Letty did not attempt to gloss over the fact, that her mother looked both ill and wretched, but rather reproached herself that though this was the case she could not help feeling happy in the company of her lover. Perhaps it was the contrast to the festive air worn by all around her

that made my lady's face look so pinched and woeful ; but certainly, as the fête-day approached, her cheeks grew more and more pallid, and her eyes sank in deepening hollows.

On the morning in question, the post-bag, through some delay on the railway, did not arrive until the family were at breakfast ; my lady, with her scarcely touched dry-toast before her, watched Sir Richard open it, and distribute the contents with an anxiety she could not conceal.

"There is nothing for you, dearest mother," said he, in answer to her inquiring looks.

"Who, then, is that for ?" returned she, pointing to an unappropriated letter he had placed at his left hand.

"Only a note for Forest, which I dare say will keep till we have left the table," said he, smiling ; "although, if you had your way, I know she would be attended to before everybody. It has the Coveton post-mark, and doubtless comes from old Jacob."

"Who is ill," said my lady, rising. "I do not see why Mary's correspondence should be delayed more than that of anyone else. I have finished my breakfast, and will take it to her at once."

When she had left the room, Sir Richard remarked with asperity, that his mother's kindness really rendered her a slave to "that woman Forest."

"That is so," assented Master Walter ; "and I have of late observed that her spirits are always at the lowest when she has been having a confab with Mary. Is it possible, I wonder, that being balked of that fellow, Derrick, Mistress Forest can have taken up with any new-fangled religious notions—I have heard of old maids doing such things—which are making her miserable and my mother too ?"

"For shame, Walter !" cried Letty. "Do you suppose mamma is capable of any such folly ?"

"I don't believe for a moment that she is a victim to any delusion herself," explained Walter ; "but she sym-

pathises with everybody she has a liking for, and the society of any such morbid person would be very bad for her. Between ourselves, I don't think that Madame de Castellan coming here has done her any good. That's a precious queer old woman, you may depend upon it. Not only did she decline to permit old Rachel and her husband to continue to sleep at Belcomb, which, considering its loneliness, one would have thought she would have been glad to do, instead of their occupying the lodge a quarter of a mile away ; but it is said that she absolutely dismissed her French maid the day after her arrival, and therefore lives entirely alone !”

“No wonder, then, she was so uncommonly anxious to get Mary,” observed the baronet ; “and I am sure I wish she may, for my mother's sake. I have no doubt they are now both closeted together over that old dotard's letter from Coveton. As if there was not enough for my poor dear mother to do and think of just now without bothering herself with her waiting-maid's father's rheumatism.”

Sir Richard was right : my lady and her confidential servant were at that very moment in the boudoir perusing with locked doors old Jacob's letter. From it Lady Lissard gathered what had happened at Coveton as certainly as though the writer had been aware of it all, and written expressly to inform his daughter.

“He has found it out,” said she with a ghastly look. “He had that fit, as your father calls it, at the moment when he learned for the first time that the girl who came ashore alive and myself are one and the same. Poor Ralph, poor Ralph !”

“Dearest mistress, I think it is poor you who are most to be pitied. Great Heaven, he will be here to-night, or to-morrow at latest ! To-morrow—in the midst of all the merry-making about Sir Richard.”

“Yes, Sir Richard !” exclaimed my lady bitterly. “The poor bastard that thinks he is a baronet ! But let him come, let him come, I say.” My lady rose

from her seat with clenched fingers and flashing eyes. “I will defend my children with my life—nay, more, with my honour. If I perjure myself to save them from shame and ruin, will not God pardon me? Who is there to witness against them save this man alone? And is not my word — my oath — as good as his?” She stepped to the little bookcase that ran round the room; and from the corner of it, half-hidden by the framework, took down a dusty volume—one of a long series, but the remainder of which were in the library. It was the *Annual Register* for the year 1832. Under the head of “Shipping Intelligence,” where the tersest but most pregnant of all summaries is always to be found—the deaths of hundreds of poor souls, the misery of thousands of survivors, and the sudden extinction of a myriad human hopes, all recorded in a single sentence—was written: “In the storm of the 14th September the emigrant vessel, *North Star*, foundered off the South Headland with all hands on board—supposed to have sprung a leak.” Then a few weeks later, the following paragraph: “From the *North Star*, emigrant ship, supposed to have been lost on the night of the 14th of last month, with all hands on board, there came on shore at Coveton, lashed to a spar, a solitary survivor, a young woman. Although much exhausted and bruised, she had received no vital injury, and her recovery is said to be assured. Her case excites much interest in the locality in question.”

“The ‘solitary survivor!’” continued my lady thoughtfully. “Who is there to gainsay it, save this man?”

“Your own heart, dearest mistress,” answered the waiting-maid solemnly. “That would not permit you to deny him, even if your conscience would. Could you meet him to-morrow face to face——”

“No, no,” exclaimed my lady shuddering. “I never could. I was mad to think of such a thing—so mad, that I trust the wickedness of the thought may be for-

given.—I am to drive into Dalwynch this afternoon about—what was it, Mary?"

"About your watch, which ought to have come home last evening, my lady."

"Yes, my watch. There is not any time to lose."

"Indeed not, dear mistress: not an hour, I should say, if I were in your place. I tremble to look out of window, lest I should see him coming yonder over the Windmill Hill."

"Yes, fixed as fate, and furious with her who has deceived him. Poor fellow, who can blame him? I can see him now."

"Heaven forbid!" exclaimed the waiting-maid, fleeing to the window. "Haste, haste away, or there will be murder done!"

"He is not there," returned my lady in a low, calm voice, "but I see him all the same. Pallid with scorn, yet bent on avenging himself. Resolved to claim his wife at any hazard, even in spite of herself. It will be terrible that he should be here in any case; but if he found me here, as you say, there might be murder done. Not that I fear for myself, God knows: I am too wretched for that."

"Oh, my lady, had you not better start at once?"

"No, Mary; I must go first to Dr. Haldane's, since the time has come. But if, in the meantime, this—this unhappy man should arrive, be sure you send the carriage for me at once to the doctor's house. I can escape him that way for certain. Perhaps, then, I may never cross this threshold any more—never clasp my dear ones in my arms and call them mine again—never say: 'My own Walter—Richard—Letty.' How can I bear to think upon it! Don't cry, Mary, for you see I do not. You know what to do in case he comes; the carriage to Dr. Haldane's instantly: and afterwards—we have settled that long ago."

"I shall forget nothing, dearest mistress. If I live, all will be done that you have resolved upon."

"Dear Mary, trusty friend, may Heaven reward you."

My lady had her bonnet on by this time, but lifted up her veil to kiss her faithful servant. "If by God's gracious will, somehow or other this misery should after all have no evil end, Mary, how happy we shall be! How we shall talk of this with our arms round one another's necks! There is a friend, says the Scripture, which sticketh closer than a brother; but I have found a servant better even than a such a friend. Good-bye, dear; if it should chance to be 'Good-bye.' Don't weep, don't speak. See that my path is clear, that I meet no one—Great Heaven, what is that knocking? Can he be come already?"

"No, dearest, no," sobbed the poor waiting-maid. "They are putting up the triumphal archway, that is all."

She left the room to see that there was nobody in the passage, or on the back stairs, by which her mistress was about to leave the house.

"The triumphal archway," muttered my lady with tearless aching eyes. "I would to Heaven they were putting the nails into my coffin instead."





CHAPTER XXXIV.

FLED.

NY lady returned to the Abbey at the usual luncheon-hour, and partook of that meal (if sitting at the table can be called so doing) with the rest of the party; while Mary Forest kept watch at the boudoir window, with her mistress's opera-glasses in her hand, scanning the Windmill Hill.

There was no likelihood of Derrick's coming for hours yet, since he had not arrived already by the same train that had brought old Jacob's letter; but there was just a possibility of this. However, he did not come. The unfrequented road, which on the morrow would be thronged with the vehicles of Sir Richard's guests, had not a single passenger. It was one of the two ways we have spoken of leading to Dalwynch, and the shorter in point of distance, although not of time, because of the winding hill; but Derrick, coming from the direction of Coveton not by the Dalwynch line, but another railway, could approach Mirk by no other route.

Immediately after luncheon, the carriage drew up at the door.

"I will not offer to go with you, dearest mother," said Letty, "because there is so much to do at home, and the more because you will be absent yourself. But you will come back as soon as you can—there's a darling!—

won't you? Nothing goes on as it should at the Abbey without you."

"Yes, dear Letty! I will come back as soon as I can."

My lady cast a wistful look at her three children. She would have given a thousand pounds to have thrown her arms around their necks, and wept her fill; but such an indulgence might have cost them and her far more than that, or anything which money could estimate. What if her strength should fail her—if she should "break down," as the saying is, at this supremest moment? She could only trust herself to nod and smile.

The whole party went out to the front door to see her off. The two young ladies standing on the hall steps with their arms round one another's waists (although I much doubt if they had grown to be the friends that they once were); Master Walter kissing his white hand to her with all the grace and fondness of a lover; Sir Richard handing her into the carriage with stately but affectionate courtesy. "The lower road—to Lever's the watchmaker's in High Street," said he to the coachman, "and don't spare the horses." Then, as the carriage drove away, he observed to the others: "What a strange freak it is of mamma to be going to Dalwynch at such a time as this about her watch. However, she ought to be back by five o'clock at latest."

The carriage did return even before that hour; but it did not contain my lady. It only brought back a letter from her, which the footman was instructed to place at once in the hands of her elder son. The man, however, had some difficulty in finding Sir Richard, who was superintending some finishing-touches that were being given to the interior of the marquée—the arrangement of certain flags over the place he was to occupy on the morrow. Sir Richard tore open the note, fearing he knew not what; then uttered a tremendous oath. His people stared, for unlike some "young masters," the baronet scarcely ever misbehaved himself in that way.

"Where did you leave my Lady, sirrah?" inquired he roughly of the footman.

"At the railway station, Sir Richard. Her ladyship took the train for town."

"Where is Miss Letty? Walter—Walter," cried the baronet, "come here."

"Hollo, what is it?" answered the captain, a little sulkily, for he was engaged in setting up an emblem composed of various weapons of war at the other end of the marquée: and pretty Polly, the gatekeeper's daughter, was handing him up certain highly-polished swords, and he was playfully accusing her of using them in transit as mirrors. "You haven't found out a mistake in the almanac, and that you came of age the day before yesterday, have you?"

"Worse than that," returned poor Sir Richard simply. "Read that, man. What, in Heaven's name, are we to do now?"

"Let us go in and see Letty," said Walter gravely, after he had read the note. "Perhaps she knows something about it; and if not, you may take your oath that Mary Forest does."

"Do you, Walter? Don't trifle with me," said the baronet earnestly; "if any business respecting yourself has taken my mother away, I conjure you to tell me all."

"No, Richard. I give you my word that I know of no reason for this extraordinary conduct. It is true that that letter from Moss Abrahams gave her some annoyance, but that matter was settled long ago. I am as surprised and dumbfounded as yourself."

"Dearest Richard!"—here he again perused my lady's note—"urgent necessity compels me to leave home for a time. You will have the explanation on the 15th. That there may be many, many happy returns of tomorrow to you, dear boy, is the heart-felt prayer of your loving mother."—"How extraordinarily strange! When is the 15th? Let's see."

"The day after to-morrow," rejoined Sir Richard gloomily. "What will to-morrow be without our mother? Good Heaven, how dreadful is all this! Is it possible, think you, to put the people off?"

"Utterly out of the question, Richard; we should require five hundred messengers."

They were walking on the lawn, and had now arrived at one of the open windows of the great ball-room, a splendid apartment, although the highly-decorated pink ceiling had been likened by a pert young architect (who wanted to persuade the baronet to let him pull down the Abbey, and build another one) to the ornaments on a twelfth-cake. Mrs. Walter, Letty, and Arthur Haldane were all very busy here, but the last two not so entirely occupied with the work in hand as to be unaware of one another's presence. At another time, Sir Richard would have been annoyed at seeing them so close together, and obviously so well pleased with the propinquity, but now he was really glad to meet with the young barrister, for whose judgment he had a great respect.

"Letty—Arthur," cried he, "read this. Do either of you know, can either of you guess, what on earth it means?"

"Mamma not to be here to-morrow!" ejaculated the former, when she had read the note. "I can scarcely believe my eyes." But at the same time there came into her mind that vague but saddening talk which her mother had held with her but lately, when my lady had said her malady was not one the doctors could cure. Arthur read the note twice over, not so much to master its contents, perhaps, as to frame his own reply to what had been asked of him.

"I certainly do not know," said he, "what can have taken your dear mother at such a time as this. We may be sure, however, it is no mere freak of fancy, but that it is done for what she believes to be your good."

"Our *good!*!" broke forth Sir Richard impatiently.

"How can it be for good that I should be placed to-morrow in a position the most embarrassing that can be conceived? What am I to say when people ask me 'Where is your mother?' Imagine what they will think of her absence on such an occasion, the most important—"

"Let us rather imagine, Richard," interrupted Letty, laying her hand upon his arm, "what our dear mother must be suffering at this moment. As Arthur says, it can be no trivial matter that takes her thus suddenly away from us; and although she may have over-estimated its urgency, we may be sure that it is her anxiety for others—that is, for us—which has caused her to do so. Mamma is incapable of a selfish action."

"I am not speaking for myself alone, Letty," returned the baronet hotly.

"I did not accuse you of doing so, Richard. What I mean is this, that however much you may feel this misfortune, mamma has to bear the burden of its cause—whatever that may be—alone. She is thinking at this moment of the alarm and sorrow she has excited here, and we may be sure is feeling for us at least as much as we feel for ourselves; and in addition to that, she has this trouble to bear, at even the nature of which we cannot guess."

Sir Richard frowned, and did not reply; but Arthur unobserved stole Letty's hand, and pressed it, in token of his loving approval. "And who is the person who is to give us the explanation on the 15th, think you?" said Walter. "I'll wager—or at least I would do so, if I hadn't given up betting—that Mistress Forest can tell us if she would."

"Then let us send for her at once," cried Sir Richard hastily; "anything is better than this suspense."

When the servant called for this purpose had been despatched: "I do not presume," said Arthur gravely, "to dictate what is your duty; but if the case were mine, Sir Richard, and my mother had expressly stated that

her motives would be explained at a certain date, I should hardly like to extract them beforehand from her confidential servant. Forgive me, for I know I am addressing one who is himself a man of the most scrupulous honour."

The baronet bit his lip. "I don't know, I'm sure, Haldane. It is true, since my mother has gone to town, that nothing we can do can bring her back in time for — But at all events there can be no harm in asking how long she is likely to be away.—Ah, here is Mistress Forest. We want to hear about my lady, Mary. She has gone to London, it seems, and we are not to know why until the day after to-morrow. Now, we are not going to ask you her reasons."

"Thank you, Sir Richard," said Mistress Forest, her puckered eyes looking really grateful.

"But what we do desire is, that you will tell us how long she will be away."

"I am sure I can't tell, Sir; Heaven knows I wish I could," answered the waiting-maid fervently. "She sent a big box over to Dalwynch by the carrier yesterday: that's all I know about it."

"Then she herself is not going to give us the explanation in person, you think?" said the baronet gloomily.

"No, Sir Richard: not in person; at least I believe not. Somebody else is going to do that for her."

"And you know who that will be?" returned the young man sternly.

"I think—at least, yes, I know, Sir; but it's not me," added the waiting-maid hastily. "I hope I know my place better than that. But my lady bade me say nothing about it, and, with all respect, wild horses should not tear it from me."

Here Mistress Forest, who had always entertained considerable terror of her austere young master, could not forbear casting a beseeching glance towards Arthur Haldane.

"We already know from Mr. Haldane's own lips," observed Sir Richard with emphasis, and looking in the same direction, "that he is not in possession of the secret of my lady's departure."

"I certainly said as much," returned Arthur haughtily; and with that, either because he was really annoyed, or did not wish to be further questioned, he stepped out upon the lawn, and walked away.

"All this is very unsatisfactory, and strange, and bad," said the baronet, after a considerable pause. "But nothing is to be got, it seems, by asking questions. We must do then the best we can for to-morrow without my mother—you, Letty, assisted by Mrs. Walter here, must do the honours of the Abbey in her place—and I wish to Heaven," added he, as he turned upon his heel, "that the day was well over."

"What a nice agreeable temper Richard has, when anything goes wrong," observed Walter, twirling his moustaches. "I'm hanged if I don't think it's that which has driven my mother away from home. She naturally enough concludes he will be unbearable when he becomes the master."

"Fie, fie, Walter!" said Letty. "I think it is much more likely that she can no longer bear to listen to the cruel things she hears her two sons say of one another. She has spoken to me of it more than once of late with tears in her eyes."

"Well, Sir Richard *has* a bad temper, Letty, there's no doubt about that," observed Mrs. Walter, striking in in defence of her husband.

"Yes; yet there are many things worse than that, Rose, and mamma has been accustomed to Richard all his life; but she has had trouble upon trouble for the last six months, *as I am sure you cannot deny*, and it is likely in the state of health to which I know she is reduced, that she feels herself totally unequal to the part she would be expected to play to-morrow."

"I think Mr. Haldane knows more of the matter than

he chooses to say," observed Rose, at once carrying the war into the enemy's camp.

"I don't think you quite understand him," returned Letty, executing the same strategic movement; "anything like duplicity is altogether foreign to his character."

"He looks simple enough certainly," remarked Rose quietly. "But I noticed that when Sir Richard asked him whether he knew, or could *guess* what had taken Lady Lisgard from home, he confined himself to replying that he did not know."

Letty made no answer, but applied herself with heightened colour to the occupation in which her brothers had interrupted her. Walter smiled sardonically, thinking of certain female savages he had been reading of that morning in some paper in the *Field apropos* of rifle-grooves, who were expert in propelling poisoned darts from blow-pipes; then catching sight of his handsome face in one of the mirrors with which the ball-room was wainscoted, he nodded, as though he recognised some friend he was constantly in the habit of meeting, yet was always glad to see, and sauntered out.

At first, he made mechanically for the marquée, but stopping himself, not as it seemed without some contention in his own mind, he turned his steps to some other part of the park. "No," said he to himself gaily, "I will be a good boy. It is true, I have had devilish hard lines lately, but then it was partly deserved. Now, the poor mother has had just as hard, and has not deserved them a bit. I will do nothing that can cause her trouble now—not even run the risk of a bit of harmless flirtation, for there always *is* a risk about that, somehow. I wonder whether Letty was right about her going away; I'm sure I can't help Richard quarrelling with me—he *will* do it. And then there was that matter of Moss Abraham's—upon my life it must have been very trying to the dear old lady. And then there was my

affair with Rose—humph ! Well, I'm very sorry, Heaven knows, if my conduct has in any way contributed to such a catastrophe ; but it's something, my dear mother, let me tell you, when your troubles are of that sort that you *can* run away from them. What an infernal fool I have made of myself in every way ! ”





CHAPTER XXXV

THE UNINVITED GUEST.

DLD Jacob Forest had made a well-grounded complaint when he cried out with such vehemence that that fellow Derrick had actually left the front door open, and the guard-ship and his rheumatism more exposed to the rigour of the elements even than usual: but to do his visitor justice, this rudeness was not committed with intention; Ralph knew not what he was doing; he was out of his mind with fury and despair.

"Damn her!" screamed he, plucking the little bunch of violets from where he had placed them so tenderly but an hour before; "so she was false, too, like the rest of them. She had no more heart in her than a woman of stone; and I have been worshipping her all my life, just as a savage worships his idol. No wonder I took to that young son of hers—how like! how like!—and like, too, in his selfish soul! Why, I was calling yonder sea a while ago a cruel smiling traitress—because in her wrath I thought that she had swallowed this woman up. But the sea is honest enough compared to her. She puts up painted panes to my memory, does she, with the money of the very man she has married! Hypocrite! Wanton! Liar! She has held converse with me, knowing who I was, across that man's very grave, and let me pour my heart out before her, drop by drop, when she might

have stanched it with a word. How *could* she do it? How *dared* she do it?—she that is a God-fearing woman, forsooth! But I suppose that all is fair against a castaway. Let her look to it, now, though. Ralph Gavestone is not a man, as I told her then, to be crossed with impunity—far less to be cajoled, betrayed, insulted, wronged! Richard Lisgard, too!—Sir Richard, as the bastard calls himself!—*your* hour of bitterness is drawing nigh too, and I will not spare you. There is no memory now of the beloved dead to stay my hand; there is the knowledge of the treacherous living to make the blow all the surer and the more fatal. Love—nay, even the impress of where I thought love had lain within me, but it was not so—is cancelled out, and Mercy with it. Friendship—bah, I have found out what that is worth! There is nothing left me, nothing in the world, now, except revenge! Lord it, Sir Richard, for yet a few hours more, among your truckling neighbours, your fawning tenants, for your time is short indeed. They may be your humble and obedient servants still, but what will they think of you, what will they say of you, behind your back, when they come to learn who you are? If your mother has the right to rule at Mirk, then I will rule there too: and you shall serve, and if not—then she is my wife still, and leaves you for me. *There* will be a downfall for your pride! Lady Lisgard of Mirk Abbey to be claimed by a ‘drunken brawler’—do you suppose that I forget such words as those—and forced to be once more plain Lucy Gavestone, for the wife of a vagabond like me has scarcely the right to be termed ‘Madam.’ The law will give her to me: there is no doubt of that. The righteous law, which is to be always upheld—remember that, my game-preserving friend—no matter what hardships it may entail upon individuals, or even what injustice it may commit in exceptional cases. How sweet it is to remember such words of wisdom, against which, in my ignorance, I was wont to fight tooth and nail. You will not forbid me the Abbey, I suppose, when I come thither to claim my

wife. To-morrow, or next day at furthest, will introduce you to your stepfather ! for I have made up my mind to acknowledge you, just as though you had been born in lawful wedlock."

Breathing forth these cruel threats, and feeding upon their fulfilment in his mind, Ralph Derrick lay awake for hours in his chamber at the *Royal Marine*, and had hardly fallen asleep when the omnibus started for the morning train. The horn, and noise of the wheels aroused him, and he leaped up out of bed with an oath, because he knew that he had missed that, his earliest opportunity, of getting to Mirk. However, having rung his bell, he learned from the waiter that it would be quite possible yet, by taking a carriage and four horses, to reach the junction before the Coveton train, which, besides, had to wait there for the midday-mail. "Of course," said the waiter, rubbing his hands, and speaking with a hesitation induced by the contemplation of Ralph's scanty kit, "it will be a very considerable expense, and perhaps —"

"Curse the expense, and you too !" ejaculated the whilom gold-digger in his old flaming manner. "Here's a ten-pound note ; and let my bill be settled and the horses put to within five minutes."

"But your breakfast, Sir ?"

"A glass of brandy and a piece of bread ; that's all I want ; quick, quick !"

The waiter departed at full speed—his anxiety to execute Derrick's orders being at least equalled by his desire to communicate them to his mistress and the chambermaids. They were only accustomed at the *Royal Marine* to the Newly Married, who were rarely in a hurry, and never broke their fast upon brandy and bread ; and to these Ralph certainly afforded a lively contrast.

The four horses carried him along at a great rate, and the old-fashioned carriage swung from side to side down every hill, so that if motion could have soothed his perturbed spirit, on the principle of like to like, it should have grown calmer with every mile. But fast as he sped,

his thoughts flew on before him—and in them he was already at Mirk Abbey, denouncing, exposing, avenging, until physical inaction became intolerable, and thrusting his head and shoulders out at the window, he bade the astonished post-boys pull up, and let him out, for that he would have no more of such travel. Then once more he pursued his way on foot, and had walked two-score of miles before he put up for the night, at one of the same inns at which he had stopped upon his way down to Coveton.

But exercise, even in this violent degree, could now no longer avail him. He was still consumed with bitterness and anger, and the desire of vengeance. He could not sleep ; and he had lost all appetite for food. He drank, as he had never drunk since he was in Cariboo ; glass after glass of raw spirits, to the wonder of his tolerably well-seasoned host, who looked to have him for quite a permanent guest, overtaken, as it seemed must come to pass, by delirium tremens. Brandy, however, could now affect him nothing ; except perhaps that it added fuel to his rage. On the third day, he grew impatient of his slow progress, and took the train upon a line of rails that brought him within a dozen miles of Mirk. As soon as he got out at the station, he inquired for a vehicle to take him to his journey's end.

"You wish to go to Mirk Abbey, do you not, Sir?" said the porter respectfully (for Ralph always travelled first-class).

"That's my business, and not yours," retorted Derrick, angrily, but without surprise ; for it seemed to him natural enough that the purpose which was consuming his whole being should be recognised in his external features.

"Nay, Sir ; I meant no harm. It is not business, but pleasure, that is taking all the world to Mirk to-day. Everything here that has four wheels, and even that has two, has been already engaged ; but if you don't mind waiting an hour or so, there will be a return-fly —"

But, with a contemptuous oath, Ralph had already resumed his journey on foot, looking neither to left nor right, but keeping his eyes steadfastly fixed on the windmill, he could even now see afar off, and which he knew crowned Mirkland Hill. The afternoon was already far spent, and by the time he reached the spot in question the dusk had already deepened into dark. On one side of the road lay the white gate and little hedge belonging to Belcomb ; on the other, the great windmill, with its dilapidated wall still unrepaired, and over which a young man was leaning and looking towards the valley with longing eyes. Ralph followed the direction of his gaze, and perceived the noble outlines of Mirk Abbey “picked out” in lines of many-coloured flame—its every window aglow with light, and the shadowy park itself islanded with two large shining spots, which old experience taught him at once were walls of canvas well lit up within.

“What is going on there ?” asked he of the miller, for such the young man’s dress proclaimed him to be.

“Why, victuals and drink, to be sure,” replied the lad, in a tone that bespeaks a grievance ; and music, and pretty girls to dance to it, and fireworks, and I don’t know what all. And here am I, the only young man in the parish that is not to enjoy himself at it : just because Master Hathaway happens to have a pressing order in hand, I am to keep the mill going all to-night. I don’t say I wishes it to rain—for that would spoil everybody’s sport—but if the wind would be so good as to fall, and stop the mill, why, I wouldn’t whistle to try and set it agoing again.”

“Yes, by-the-bye,” said Ralph, “I heard something at the station about some goings-on at Mirk, but I didn’t take much heed. What is it, lad? And why are they all so gay down yonder at the Abbey ?”

“Why, it’s Sir Richard coming of age, to be sure,” answered the lad. “You must hail from a darned long way off, not to know that ; and yet I seem to know your face. Why, you’re Mr. Derrick, aint you, as used to

lodge at the *Lisgard Arms*? I thought so. Well, you'll find nobody there now, for Steve has been taken into favour again—thanks to my lady, I believe—and is up at the park with the rest; and they won't let *you* into the grounds, you know; so you might just as well stop here, and have a chat with a poor fellow as—”

Striking his stick with violence against the ground, Ralph strode away down the hill. This, then, was the very time for him to come upon the inmates of Mirk Abbey, while they were holding their heads highest, and to cast them down to the very dust. If his determination had needed strength, if the sharpness of his revenge had wanted an edge, both had been supplied by the careless words of the miller's boy.

Before the night was out, not only that lad, but all the parish, nay, all the county, should learn that he, Ralph Derrick, could not only be no longer forbidden to enter the Lisgards' doors, but would perhaps even rule within them as the husband of my lady herself.

The village, as he had been forewarned, was as deserted as Auburn itself, and the inn fast closed. But the iron gates of the Abbey were flung back, as though to welcome all comers, and the rheumatic lodge-keeper and his wife had betaken themselves with their pretty daughter to the festive scene within. So Ralph strode, undenied, up the long dense avenue, made darker by the glancing lights at the far end, like some embodiment of misfortune, about to paralyse youth and hope with a word. The fairy-like splendours of the scene before him seemed to him like a house of painted cards, which, at his finger-touch, should collapse in utter ruin; his frown should silence all those melodies that jarred so on his reluctant ears; that merriment should be turned into wailing, or still better, into scornful laughter. The scene of pride should be made a place of shame.

No one of all the crowd of holiday-makers seemed to take notice of his presence, though he carried with him, from spot to spot, the only scowling face that was to be

seen among them. He stood at the opening of the great marquée, and watched the dancers ; his evil eye scanned each gay couple as they whirled before him, but settled upon none whom it had come to wither. Sir Richard and his brother had inaugurated the proceedings there by taking part in a few dances, but had then withdrawn themselves to the ball-room within. In the second tent, reserved for the humblest class of guests, the mirth was already growing somewhat uproarious ; but there was one among the company, who, though he took two glasses for other folk's one, looked as sober as an undertaker ; and Derrick came behind this man and plucked his arm.

"Steve," said he, "I want a word with you. Come out with me, and leave these capering idiots."

The landlord of the *Lisgard Arms* did not even make a pretence of being glad to recognise his late lodger : he had been received, as Hathaway's lad had stated, into favour at the Abbey once more, through the intercession of my lady, but he was still upon his good-behaviour, and it excessively annoyed him to see the original cause of Sir Richard's displeasure with himself once more at Mirk, and intruding where he was least welcome.

However, the two withdrew together apart from the crowd.

"What is it, Derrick ? I think it is foolish of you venturing here. I am sorry to say that I have promised not to receive you again at my inn. I did not dream of your coming back, or else I would never have done so."

"Don't trouble yourself about that, Steve. If I stay at Mirk at all, it will be here, at the Abbey."

"At the Abbey ! You have been drinking, Derrick. Now, take my advice, and be off; at all events, for the present. To-day, when everybody is being entertained by Sir Richard, folks would resent any insult put upon the family, I can promise you—it's the worst day you could possibly have selected to force your way in here."

"No, Steve, the best day—the only day. I would

have given ten thousand pounds, I tell you, rather than have missed it, or have arrived to-morrow instead."

"I am glad you are so rich, man," returned Steve drily, "for it is the impression down here that you lost all your money upon that French horse at the Derby; poor Master Walter, too, you led him into a pretty mess, it seems."

"Curse Master Walter!" ejaculated Derrick angrily. "He's a mean skunk, if ever there was one."

"People don't think so hereabouts, Mr. Derrick; and I should recommend you not to express your opinion quite so loudly. If any of these volunteers heard you speaking of their captain in that way, you would not escape with a whole skin."

"That's my look-out," answered Derrick roughly. "I want you to tell me where I can find Sir Richard. I have particular business with him; something for his private ear."

"It isn't about my lady, is it?" inquired the other eagerly.

"Yes, it is. How came you to think of that? Eh?"

"How could I be off on it, man? Is she not the uppermost thought of everybody here? Do you really bring any news of her? And, look you, if it's bad news, don't tell it. I don't like that ugly look of yours, Mr. Derrick. If you have done any harm to my lady, I, for one, will help to wring your neck round."

"Do you mean to say she is not here?" gasped Ralph, without heeding his last words.

"Of course not; didn't you know that? She's gone away, all of a sudden. Sir Richard quite broke down when he alluded to it in his speech. He said that urgent business had compelled her to be in London; but Roberts told me that the family themselves have no idea why she took herself off——"

"Ah, but they do though," exclaimed Derrick scornfully. "And I know, too, or I'm much mistaken. She's trying *that* dodge on, is she? Not at home, eh? And

she supposes that I shall leave my card, and go away like any other well-conducted visitor. She'll find me an acquaintance whom it is not so easy to drop, I fancy. So my lady has fled, has she?" continued he. "Hadn't the pluck to blazon it out, eh? She won't, however, have flown very far from her young chicks, I reckon. And, perhaps, it's just as well that I should cut the comb of this young bantam, Sir Richard, while his mother's out of the way; not that I feel an ounce of pity for her either."

" You'll feel a horsewhip about your shoulders, Ralph Derrick, before you're a quarter of an hour older, or else I'm much mistaken," observed Steve ruefully. " I'll have nothing more to say to you, and that's a fact. You are not only drunk, but stark mad. I never heard a fellow go on with such a farrago of rubbish. Look here, if you'll come home with me at once, you shall have as much brandy as you can drink; but you shan't kick up a row here. See, one of the ball-room windows is wide open, and Sir Richard himself, for all you know, may— Confound the fellow, it will be only kindness to tell Styles, the policeman, to take him up."

Derrick had burst away from Steve, and was running across the lawn to the very place where the Lisgard family had discussed their mother's departure upon the preceding evening.





CHAPTER XXXVI.

OUT OF THE CAGE.

HE immense ball-room was now a blaze of light, and full, though by no means crowded, with brilliant company. One of the windows, as Steve had said, had been thrown up, and through it the scene was as distinctly displayed to Ralph as though he were within. He stood there alone, for a feeling of respect kept others from the immediate neighbourhood. He beheld fair Letty, hostess and belle in one, moving from group to group, who broke out into smiles at her approach ; he beheld dark Rose whirl by “in gloss of satin and glimmer of pearls”—the self-same “parure” which had enslaved poor Anne Rees—and followed by many an admiring eye. He beheld Master Walter’s smiling face bent down to whisper to some blushing girl, who forgot, perhaps, for the moment that the handsome captain was already married—that he had been entrapped by that scheming young person with the extremely self-confident manner. Lastly, he beheld the man he sought talking with a gentleman of apoplectic habit, and the air of a prosperous licensed victualler, but who was no less a personage than the Earl of Marrobone, and Lord-lieutenant of Wheatshire. His lordship had sought the open window for fresh air, and the two were conversing upon county matters, in which Sir Richard, young as he was, already took the keenest interest.

"You will take your seat on the bench at once, Sir Richard, I hope," were the first words which Derrick caught. "Your commission is, of course, already made out, and you will probably receive it to-morrow."

"I thank you, my lord. Yes, I shall make a point of being a regular attendant at the petty sessions."

"And you will be wanted, too, at Dalwynch; for between ourselves, the old general yonder is a little past his work in that way. I don't wish to prejudice you, I am sure, against a man in such a respectable position; but the fact is, he and I are not such good friends as we might be. He wants me to make Mr. Chesham—you know, of course, who that is, the relation in which they stand to one another, and so on—a magistrate for the county. Now, I do think that that is a distinction which should never be conferred upon any natural son—that is, unless the family of the father should be really of mark, which is not the case with our friend the general, whatever may be said of Lady Theresa. I don't think, because a man has married into the peerage, that he should therefore be himself admitted to all the privileges of good birth."

"With all deference, my lord," returned Sir Richard stiffly, "I consider that under no circumstances whatever, no matter whether the father be peer or commoner, should the commission of the peace be conferred upon a bastard."

"Then Richard Lisdard must never sit upon the bench at Dalwynch!" exclaimed a malignant voice close beside the speaker.

In an instant, Sir Richard was upon the lawn without, face to face with his insulter. No one in the ball-room, save the two gentlemen who had been conversing together, had overheard the exclamation, and his lordship had not caught it distinctly. The band was playing on, as accurately as before, and the dancers were dancing in tune; the cavaliers were whispering their soft nothings, and the ladies making their sweet replies, while the two

men without—the one so scrupulously apparelled in the latest fashion, the other dishevelled, travel-stained, and in all respects what we call “a rough,” but both as brave as lions—were grappling one another by their throats. Sir Richard, who never forgot any man’s face—a faculty not uncommon with persons of his class and character—had recognised Ralph Derrick, the turbulent interloper in his parish, the evil counsellor of his brother, at the first glance ; and enraged at his audacious trespass at such a time, quite as much as by his late brutal insult to himself, which he set down as the result of drink, he threw himself upon the gold-digger with the utmost fury. The Earl of Marrobone stepped outside also, and closed behind him the ball-room window ; the stout old nobleman was one of the coolest hands in England, and never lost his presence of mind. Even thus debarred from making that public exposure of the young baronet which Derrick had promised himself, he might have said something which his lordship would not have forgotten—for he was one of those who had seen too much of the world to believe anything untrue merely because it seemed impossible—but that, at the first touch of Sir Richard’s fingers, Ralph’s fury deprived him of all utterance except a few desperate imprecations. He would have liked, with folded arms, to have impeached the young baronet as a base-born impostor (for he felt convinced that the reason for my lady’s flight was known to him and the rest of the family), and have stated his own wrongs in a few earnest and pregnant words before the whole company in yonder room ; but now that he had his enemy so close, “the blind wild beast of force within him, whose home is in the sinews of a man,” was driven to strike and strike again. So the precious half minute, that elapsed before help came to Sir Richard, was wasted, and Derrick found himself helpless, and with his wrongs untold, in the clutch of half-a-dozen men, and one of them the village policeman, whom Steve had found at last, and despatched for that very purpose..

"Take him and lock him up," exclaimed Lord Marrbone, perceiving that Sir Richard was too excited to speak. "A night in the watch-house will sober the drunken brute, and cool his courage. Take him away, I say," for Ralph began to weave afresh his choicest flowers of speech—mere onion-ropes of the wickedest words—"and put the foul-mouthed scoundrel into quod!" So they bore Ralph forth, not without very rough treatment, through the gates, and cast him into a small but well-secured tenement, known as "the Cage," but so seldom used in the orderly little village, that it was in the occupation of a certain white rabbit and her family (pets of the constable's children), who had to be ejected, to make room for this very different tenant.

Sir Richard Lisgard went up stairs to refit, and returned to the ball-room, where none had even remarked his absence, with an unimpeachable white cravat concealing an ugly bruise upon his windpipe; but all smiles had departed from his noble features, and it was observed by Mrs. Walter Lisgard, in confidential conversation with the Honourable Poppin Jay, that her dear brother-in-law looked more like Don Quixote de la Mancha even than usual. He had made up his mind that, under the circumstances, it was impossible he could be upon the bench of magistrates while Derrick's case was being entered into, and was disturbed by the apprehension that the old general would not look upon the matter in a sufficiently important light, or punish the offender with all the rigour of the law.

By no means quietly, however, had the affair passed off without doors. There was nothing, according to rumour, which drunken Derrick had not done in the way of misbehaviour towards the young baronet, from bad words to the use of a bowie-knife, and nothing which he did not deserve. The news flew from mouth to mouth like wildfire; the tenantry, the peasantry, and the household were all in possession of the facts—and of very much more than the facts, within half an hour of their

real or supposed occurrence. Last of all to hear it was Mistress Forest, for whom a wholesome respect was entertained by all the domestics, and to whom, being notoriously the object of Derrick's affections, it was of course a delicate matter to communicate such intelligence.

Little Anne Rees, however, stole up stairs to Mary's own room, where she knew my lady's waiting-maid was sitting, far from all the noise and gaiety, and thinking sadly of her poor dear mistress and her troubles. "Oh Ma'am, please Ma'am, such a dreadful thing have happened!" said she. "Mr. Derrick have come back again.—Don't ye faint; don't ye take on so" (for Mistress Forest had turned as white as Anne's own apron); "he's not dead. But he's gone and pitched into Sir Richard before all the company, and they fought together dreadful, I don't know how long."

"What did he say, girl?" exclaimed Mistress Forest eagerly; "I mean, what did they fight about?"

"Well, he did not say much, didn't Mr. Derrick, beyond cussing most uncommon strong. It took six on 'em to carry him away, for all the world like a corpse, except for his kicking and swearing; and when they said he would be up before the bench on Thursday, he said 'He wished it was to-morrow, that was all;' and at the same time he laughed that wicked, that it went quite cold to the small of my back."

"And where have they put the poor man, after all?"

"In the cage, Ma'am. The key was not to be found, but they've barred him up just like a wild beast. And oh, Mistress Forest, it isn't my place, and I ask your pardon, but don't you give him no more encouragement, for he *is* a wild beast, and nothing less, if you could only see him."

"That will do, Anne; though I'm obliged to you for coming to tell me. I must speak to Sir Richard tomorrow, and try and beg him off. Good-night."

"And aren't you coming down to supper, nor to see

the fireworks, nor nothing?" inquired the little maid in amazement.

"No, Anne; I was not in a humour for such things before, and certainly I am not so now. I am going to bed."

But no sooner had the grateful little girl—who, though she waited no longer on Mrs. Walter (who had brought her own maid with her), yet always remembered that she owed her enfranchisement to Mistress Forest—gone down stairs, than Mary took up her bonnet and cloak, and hurried softly after her. It was impossible not to meet persons at every turn; but it was not difficult, in the general hubbub and excitement, to avoid their observation; and this she did. The night was very dark; and once away from the gleam and glitter of the house and lawn, Mary had to slacken her pace even down the avenue she knew so well. When she was half-way down it, as nearly as she could guess, she heard a noisy throng of men approaching from the other direction, and shrank on one side, behind a tree. Some of them carried lanterns, and as they went by, she recognised Styles, the rural policeman, and also Mr. Steve.

"I am as sorry as can be," the latter was saying, "and would much rather see the poor fellow well away."

"Take care you go no further that wishing, however," responded the guardian of the law. "It would be a bad night's work for any man who should let that fellow out, mind you: ordered into custody by the Lord-lieutenant himself, and charged with assault and battery of a baron-knight—I never set eyes on such an owdacious scamp."

"He's simply mad, that's all," returned Steve, sadly—"mad with drink. For whoever heard one in his senses, or even drunk in a natural way, talk such infernal rubbish! Didn't he say he was 'my lady's husband!'"

The answer was drowned in a great shout of laughter, and so the men passed on. Mary waited until she was sure there were no more to come, then walked on with her arms outstretched before her, as fast as she dared go.

Suddenly there was a sharp and rusty shriek behind her, and a glare of lurid light which showed her the gateway right in front.

"They have begun to fire the rockets," muttered she ; "so there will be nobody in the village, that is certain." The little street, much lighter than the way by which she had hitherto come, was indeed quite empty, but by no means noiseless ; a sound of confused shouting came dully up from the bottom of the hill, where, as she well knew, the cage was situated ; and truly, as Anne Rees had said, it struck upon the ear like the roaring of some angry beast making night hideous. Mary stopped for a moment to listen ; and when she went on, her face was paler, though not less determined-looking than before.

"Sir Richard is a bastard—a bastard—a bastard ! My lady is not nearly so good as she should be ; and I'm her husband in the lock-up ! Down with the Lisgards—down with them ; and down they shall come !"

These were the words, but interspersed with the most hideous imprecations, with which Mistress Forest's ears were greeted as she approached the little round house. Taking advantage of a momentary pause in the stream of denunciation, she knocked with her clenched hand at the nail-studded door.

"Sir Richard is a bastard ! no more Sir Richard than you are !" shrieked the voice within. "Be sure you go to the magistrates' meeting at Dalwynch on Thursday, and let all Mirk go with you ; then shall you see pride have a fall, and the Lisgards come down with a run ! Down with them—down with them—and down they shall come !"

"Ralph—Ralph Derrick, it is me."

"Who's me ? a woman ?" inquired the prisoner eagerly. "Then I'll tell you about my lady, because you'll enjoy it. She's *not* my lady ; she's no more my lady than you are."

"Ralph Gavestone, I know that," answered Mistress Forest, with her mouth glued to a crack in the door.

"Oh, you know that, do you? Then you must be the devil, whom I have lately suspected to be of the female gender, and am now convinced of it. You are of course aware, then, that I am her husband?"

"Yes, I am.—Will you be quiet, and go away to Dalwynch, and not try to enter the Abbey grounds again this night, if I let you out?"

"Certainly. To-day is Tuesday, or it was so before midnight. I shall therefore have to wait for my revenge till Thursday, if I am not set free; whereas, if you let me out, I can go to work at once; I can see an attorney to-morrow morning. That should please you rarely, if you are indeed the devil. There's another bolt still over the hole through which I kicked Steve's leg. I left my mark on some of them, mind you—R. G."

Mary Forest had opened the cage; and behold there stood her whilom lover, bleeding and ragged, his red beard plucked a thousand ways, his features haggard, his eyes flaming with rage and hate.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" said he, with something of softness in his turbid but vehement speech. "I might have known that, if I had thought a little. But it's no good, my partridge—plump still, though a little gray. I'm meat for your mistress now; I am the master of Mirk; or at least I shall be in a day or two. I'm her ladyship's husband—better luck than she deserves, you'll think; and I can't be two women's husband at the same time, any more than my lady could have two mates. That was her little mistake, for which she is about to reap the fruits. Sir Richard is a bastard—a bastard—a bastard!"

"You said that if I unbarred this door, you would start for Dalwynch," observed Mistress Forest firmly. "You used to be a man whose word could be relied on. Why do you not go?"

"I am going at once, my plump one. You have revenged yourself and me at the same time. There is no kindness in this, I well understand, you know; there is no such thing as kindness in the world."

"You are wrong there, Ralph Gavestone. It is because I love my mistress, rather than pity *you*—although I *do* pity you still—that I have come hither to save you from a night's lodging in such a place. It would have grieved my mistress to the heart to think you were so served, I know."

"To the *what?*?" returned Ralph with a savage laugh. "To her *heart*, did you say? Why, the thing doesn't exist, wench! If, however, there does still cling to her anything of the sort, when I tell them that Sir Richard's a bastard, that'll wring it."

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy," cried Mistress Forest, terrified at the deadly menace of his tone, and uttering her words as though they were a charm against an evil spirit.

"Blessed are the merciful!" echoed Ralph bitterly. "That may be so, for I have never known them; but cursed are the treacherous and the false! You have heard of the avenging angel—well, though my wings are so tattered and torn just now, that's me. Do you see the mimic lightning yonder over the Abbey? It will be stricken to-morrow from turret to basement by a forked shaft. Down with the Lisgards, and down they shall come!"

Shrieking this to a sort of frenzied measure, he suddenly broke away, and took the Dalwynch road, up Mirkland Hill. Mary listened with some feeling of relief to his fading strains, then sighed, and wiped from her eyes a few honest tears.

"He was not always a bad man, I am sure," soliloquised she pitifully, "and now God forgive him—he knows not what he's doing! He is mad."



CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE RECONCILIATION.

HE day after a great festivity in a great house is generally a dull one. It begins late; for both servants and guests are wearied, and there is nothing about it which is not inferior to other days except the luncheon, which in the way of "sweets," at all events, is always exceptionally good. Sir Richard, however, who went through life as nearly as could be to an automaton, was up at his usual time; and descending to the empty breakfast-room, beheld, seated in an arm-chair, which he had wheeled to the window, a little wizened old man, in brightest Hessian boots, drab breeches, and a cut-away coat with flap-pockets of the fashion of half a century ago.

"Dr. Haldane!" exclaimed the young man in extreme amazement. "God bless my soul *and* body!"

"I hope he will, Sir," rejoined the visitor drily, extending three fingers somewhat stiffly.

"No, Sir; surely your whole hand!" cried the baronet warmly. "Your face is the pleasantest sight—save that of my dear mother's—that I could hope to set eyes on in Mirk Abbey; and I am not going to be fobbed off with such a salutation as that."

"You get nothing more from me, Richard, unless the business I have come about—very much against the grain, I can tell you—gets satisfactorily accomplished."

"Does it relate to my dear mother, Sir?"

"Of course it does, young man. What else, do you think, would have had power to break my resolution—to bring me hither—to this room, in which I have not set foot these twenty years, and where I last sat, side by side—with—But what is that to you? I suppose a man is not very likely to be moved by the memories of a dead father, who pays no respect to the feelings of his living mother."

"I am not aware, Dr. Haldane," began Sir Richard with some haughtiness.

"I know *that*, Sir," broke in the other impetuously. "You are so wrapped up in selfishness—you and that scampish brother of yours—that neither of you have any thought except for your own miserable quarrels. You were not aware, I dare say, that their constant repetition is driving your mother into her grave, as they have already driven her from her once happy home; and it is because you don't know it—because you won't see it—that I am come hither, once for all, to inform you of the fact. But perhaps such a little matter has no interest in your eyes: in which case, I assure you, since it is entirely for her sake, and not at all for yours, that I have come, I shall be exceedingly glad to go away again."

"Have you any message to deliver, Dr. Haldane," asked the baronet with an angry flush, "direct from my mother, or are you merely stating your own doubtless valuable, but quite unasked-for opinions?"

"I have a message from her to deliver to you, and to the rest of you, young man; and if you think it worth while to send for your brother and sister, you had better do so."

The young man rang the bell, and gave the necessary orders. Dr. Haldane took up a book of family prayers that lay beside him, and grunted cynically as he read Sir Richard's name on the title-page. "What a work for a fellow like this to write his name in, who drives his mother out of her own house!" muttered he, and then

affected to be immersed in the contents. The baronet did not reply, but occupied himself in opening his letters, one of which was from Madame de Castellan. That lady expressed herself as “desolated” at the news of her old friend’s departure from the Abbey, the cause of which she was dying to hear. “If, however,” ran the postscript, “the absence of my lady was for any reason likely to continue, might not Mary Forest be despatched, at all events in the meantime, to Belcomb, where Madame was absolutely without any waiting-maid at all—with the exception of old Rachel—until another could be procured from France, to supply the place of wicked Annette, departed almost without a word of warning.”

“Cunning old wretch!” murmured Sir Richard, crumpling up the pale thin paper with its scratchy foreign caligraphy, and throwing it into the grate. “She thinks of nothing but herself.”

“How odd!” exclaimed the little doctor bitterly. “The lady’s case must be quite unique.”

Not a word more was spoken by either until Letty entered, a little pale, but looking exquisitely lovely.

“Dear Dr. Haldane, who would have thought of seeing you *here*? How pleased I am !”

The doctor rose with alacrity from his seat, and kissed her affectionately upon the forehead.

“I am sure, said she with earnest gravity, “that you have brought us news of dearest mamma.”

“So *you* have thought of her, have you, little one?” answered he fondly. (Letty was about three inches taller than the doctor.) “I fancied she would have been no longer missed. Everybody was so happy here yesterday, I am told ; and everything went on so well without her.”

“It did not, indeed,” returned Letty indignantly. “Nothing seemed to go right in her absence, notwithstanding all I could do ; and as for being happy, I can answer for myself and my brothers, that not five minutes elapsed all day without our thinking of her,

and grieving for her loss. And oh, dear Dr. Haldane, do you know why she has left us in this sad manner, and when we shall see her back again?"

"I have her own explanation of why she has left Mirk Abbey," replied the doctor; "but as for her return, that will depend upon yourselves—I mean upon Sir Richard and Captain Lisgard. For *you*, Letty, she bids me say have been at all times what a loving child should be to a parent.—Master Walter, your servant, Sir.—No, I will not shake hands with a man who ruins his mother by gambling debts, and breaks her heart with hatred of his own brother."

"That is not true, at least I do hope, Walter!" said Sir Richard quickly.

"No ; false, upon my honour," returned the captain. "My mother never told you to say that, Sir."

"Not quite that—no, she did not," admitted the little old man, whose eyes had begun to lose their hard and inexorable expression, notwithstanding his harsh words, from the moment Walter entered the room. It was so difficult even for a social philosopher to be severe and stern with that young man. "Yet I am bound to say, Walter, that it is you who have been most to blame with respect to that good mother, who only lives but for her children, and whose very love for them has compelled her to withdraw herself from beneath this roof. I will not now dwell upon your clandestine marriage ; I leave yourself to imagine how the want of trust in your best friend as well as parent evinced in that hasty step must have wounded her loving heart. Nor do I wish—that is to say, your mother herself requests me not to bear hardly upon you with respect to your gambling debts. You know the full extent of them perhaps—yes, I am afraid of that—better than she does even yet ; but she has paid enough of them already to seriously embarrass her own affairs."

"I have made a solemn promise never to bet or gamble more, Dr. Haldane," said the captain, hoarsely.

“ I am glad of it, Walter ; but what I was about to say was, that in this case, as well as in that of your marriage, it was not so much the error itself, as the want of frankness evidenced by your concealment of the matter. To be ashamed of having done wrong, is a proper feeling enough ; but if it be not accompanied by the acknowledgment of the offence, it only shows one to be a coward, not a penitent. However, bad as your conduct has been, in these two particulars, your mother would doubtless have done her best to forget, as she hastened in both instances to forgive it. But what she could *not* forget, since it happened every day and every hour, were the quarrels between yourself and your brother.” Here the doctor turned sharply round on the young baronet, who had been hitherto listening, not, perhaps, without complacency, to the catalogue of his brother’s misdeeds.—“ I think, from what I have seen myself, Richard, that it is *you* who are most in fault here. It is no use your looking proud and cold on me. I never cared three brass farthings for such airs, though they now and then misbecame even your poor father, who was worth a dozen of you. But this ridiculous assumption of superiority—founded upon mere accident of birth—naturally offends a high-spirited young man like Walter, who, if he was in your place, would certainly not make himself *odious* in that way, however he might fail in other matters belonging to your position, which suffers nothing, I readily allow, in your able hands. That you have the administrative faculty in a high degree, Sir, I concede ; but this is not Russia, and if it were, you are not the Czar.”

“ No man in Mirk ever called me a tyrant, Dr. Haldane.”

“ Perhaps no man ever dared, Sir ; but *I* dare to say that a son whose conduct is such that his mother can no longer bear to witness it, is something worse than a tyrant. And be sure that if you continue so to behave, you will never see her face under this roof again.”

“ My God, but this is very horrible ! ” cried Sir Richard,

striking his forehead. "I had no idea—I never dreamed that matters were coming to any such pass as this.—Walter—brother, did it seem to you that we were so very like to Cain and Abel?"

The two young men embraced, perhaps for the first time in their lives.

"Oh, when you tell her what you have seen, Sir, do you think my mother will come back?" cried Richard, with the tears in his fine eyes.

"I cannot say that; I am sure, however, that she will be greatly comforted. May I tell her that this is not a mere impulse of the moment, but that you are resolved from this time forth to be brothers indeed?"

"I will do my very best, Walter."

"And I mine, Richard," answered the other. "Don't reproach yourself like that"—for the vast frame of his elder brother shook with sobs—"it is much more my fault than yours: and you have been very good to me about my debts; kinder than most fellows in your position would have been—yes, you have, Dick; yes, you have. How very, very long it is since I have called you Dick; not since we were at school together! You used to call me Watty, then, you know."

"Yes, Watty; yes, I had almost forgotten it. Let us go to our mother at once, lad—as we used to do when we made up our quarrels in the old times—and ask her to come back again, and take her place here, where we all miss her so much.—Where is she, Dr. Haldane?"

"I don't know—that is, I may not tell, my boy," returned the old gentleman hesitatingly, who, with Letty's hand fast clasped in his, was staring out of window as hard as he could, but his eyes were very dim.

"Have you nothing more to tell us, Sir?" asked Sir Richard, humbly.

"Well, no, boys. The letter——"

"The letter!" ejaculated Letty; "I remember now that dear mamma told me herself that when this very thing should come to pass—although I little knew at the

time to what she was alluding—we should find a letter in her desk."

"It is not there now: she put it into my hands, and I—I tore it up," observed the doctor. "I have told you faithfully all that it contained, with one exception. I do not choose to speak of that, dear Letty, and I have your mother's permission not to do so."

"Let me speak of it, then," said Sir Richard, stealing his arm round his sister's waist, and kissing her very tenderly. "The message the doctor will not give respects yourself, dear, and his son Arthur. My foolish pride—"

"Pride, indeed!" broke in the little old man impetuously; "your confounded impertinence, I call it."

"Very well, doctor," continued the baronet smiling; "let it be so, if you will. I had the audacity to suppose, Letty, that Mr. Arthur Haldane was not good enough for you."

"Nor is he," contested the little doctor with irritation. "Nobody's good enough for Letty Lisgard. But he is as good as can be found in England, that I will say, though the young man is my own son. And if he does not make you a pattern husband, I'll cut him off with a shilling."

"I shall be glad to give you away to such an honest fellow, Letty," said the baronet, warmly; "so let that matter be considered settled."

It was very pleasant to see the blushing girl hiding her tearful face in the old man's arms. "Oh mamma, mamma," murmured she, "how happy I should be if you were but with us!"

"Well, well, that will be soon, I hope, my dear," said the doctor, patting her silken head. "I will do all I can on my part to persuade her; I am sure I shall make her happy with this news."

"Yes; but in the meantime," said Letty, "how terrible it must be for her to be all alone. If you know where she is, can you not at least send Forest to be with her?"

"No, no ; but, by-the-bye, I have forgotten to do your mother's bidding with respect to that very person. She expressly desired that until her own return to Mirk, Mary may be sent to Belcomb, where Madame de Castellan is just now in saddest need of her."

"Ay, she writes to me that she has lost her French maid," said Sir Richard, picking up the crumpled note : "in that case, Mary had better go off at once."

"There is worse trouble at Belcomb than that," remarked the doctor gravely. "That poor fellow Derrick, who, I hear, made so much disturbance at the *fête* yesterday, has met with a sad accident."

"Why, the man was put in the cage quite safe," said Sir Richard.

"Yes ; but unfortunately for himself, he was let out again, and starting in the dark over Mirkland Hill, whole drunk, and half mad, the poor wretch wandered into the mill-yard."

"Through that gap in the wall !" exclaimed the baronet with excitement. " Didn't I say the very last time we went by, that some accident would happen there, through that man Hathaway's neglect ?"

"Well, it has happened now, with a vengeance," pursued the doctor, drily. "I was sent for this morning at two o'clock, to Belcomb, where this poor fellow had been carried, because it was a better place for him to lie in than the mill. Hathaway had been working overtime, it seems ; the sails were going till near midnight, and the story is that this poor fellow strayed beneath them, and was absolutely taken up and carried round ; but, at all events, he lies there, very ill—dying, I think—with concussion of the brain, and Heaven knows what beside. I dare not move him even to examine his ribs."

"Good God ! what can we do for him ?" exclaimed Sir Richard. " Is there nothing we can send ?"

"He has everything he requires, or that he ever will have need of, poor fellow, in this world. But old Rachel is not a good hand at nursing, while Madame de

Castellan, although good-natured enough—for a French-woman—is quite incapable of such a task; so you couldn't do better than send Mary, as Madame has requested, though little knowing how much she would have need of her: her assistance will be invaluable, and indeed some sort of help must be had at once. I am going over there myself immediately, and will take her in my gig, if you can spare her, Miss Letty, and will tell her to get ready."

"By all means," cried Letty, hastily leaving the room upon that errand.

"Of course, all notion of prosecuting this poor fellow is now put out of the question, whatever happens," observed the doctor.

"Quite so—quite so," answered the baronet, eagerly. "Poor drunken wretch; I am sure I'm very sorry. And I tell you what, Dr. Haldane, if this man dies, there should be some sort of deodand laid upon that mill. Hathaway ought to be punished for wilful neglect."

"That won't bring the poor man to life again, though, observed the doctor.

"No, of course not; though, if one may be allowed to say so, he really led such a sad life, by all accounts, it seems almost as well that he should end it. It would be a happy release, I mean, if he was to die, poor fellow; don't you think so?"

"Yes, I do. It would be better for himself, and better for others," returned the doctor, very gravely.

"Just so," said Sir Richard "better for all concerned, poor man."



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RALPH'S APPEAL.

HOWEVER Dr. Haldane, at my lady's own request, may have misrepresented to the young folks at the Abbey the motives which had caused her flight, he told them truth as respected Derrick. That unfortunate man had indeed met with the frightful mischance described. When he left Mary Forest on the previous night, his mind confused with vague revengeful passion, and his brain muddled with blows, as well as with the spirits he had of late taken in such quantities, and the effects of which were beginning to tell upon his exhausted frame, he had staggered up Mirkland Hill almost like one in a dream. The night was pitchy dark, and although ever and anon a burst of light came forth from the fireworks in the Abbey grounds, they were of course perfectly useless for his guidance. The top of the hill being quite bare of trees, was less obscure than the way he had already come, and in any other circumstances he could scarce have come to harm ; but as it was, stumbling blindly on with his head low, he entered the mill-yard through that fatal gap in the wall, without even knowing he had left the high-road. The very roaring of the sails, which revolved dangerously near the ground, might have warned him, but that his ears were already occupied with the seething and tumult of his own brain ; and when the terrible thing struck him, before

which he went down upon the instant as the ox falls before the poleaxe, he never so much as knew from what he had received his hurt. There he lay for more than an hour, underneath the whirling sails, which one after another came round to peer over his haggard face, gashed with that frightful wound. The lad in charge knew nothing of what had happened, being engaged in the top story watching the fireworks in the park beneath; but about midnight he stopped the mill, and descending with his lantern, its rays by chance fell upon Ralph's prostrate body. Some persons returning from the festivities at the Abbey happened to be going by at that very time, and with their assistance he was carried across the road to the lodge at Belcomb (there being no sort of accommodation for one in his condition at the mill), and from thence to Madame de Castellan's little cottage.

That lady was for the time, as she had stated in her letter to Sir Richard, the sole inhabitant of Belcomb; but with the injured man, old Rachel and her husband the gatekeeper of course arrived, and the former did what she could as sick-nurse until the arrival of Dr. Haldane, for whom a messenger was at once despatched. The old Frenchwoman, who was aroused with difficulty, and characteristically kept them waiting at the door while she made herself fit for the reception of company, was so shocked and terrified by what had happened, that she was at first of no use at all. She had expressed herself in broken English as being very glad to be of any service to the poor sufferer while they were bearing him within, and had even busied herself in procuring hot water and bandages; but no sooner did she catch sight of his ghastly face, seamed with that cruel gash, than all her resolution appeared to desert her, and she swooned away. By the time the doctor arrived, however, she had established herself in the sick-room, and although he had described her as incapable of doing much in the way of tendance, she was at least doing her best.

As for Ralph, he lay breathing stertorously, but quite

motionless and unconscious. His mighty chest rose and fell, but by no means equably; his large brown hairy hands lay outstretched before him on the white coverlet; his face washed clean indeed from the recent blood-stains, but with the tangled beard still clotted with gore. It seemed strange that that powerful English frame of his should lie there so helplessly, while Madame, with her show-white hair and delicate fragile hands, was ministering to him with such patient care; she that must have been his senior, one would have thought to look at them, by at least twenty years. Perhaps it was the sense of this contrast which caused the doctor to glance from the one to the other so earnestly, even before he commenced his examination of the wounded man.

"Will he live?" asked Madame in English. "God knows," added she with trembling accents, "that I have no other wish within my heart but to hear you say 'Yes.'"

"Of course, Madame," returned the other, with meaning, "I do not pay you so ill a compliment as to suppose you to wish him dead, because he inconveniences you by his presence here; but I cannot say 'Yes' or 'No.' He is terribly hurt. The spine is injured; and there are ribs broken which I cannot even look to now. But it is here"—he pointed to the forehead—"where the worst danger lies: unhappily, the mischief has been done when he was—in the worst possible state to bear such a blow in such a place."

"Does he know, doctor——"

"He knows nothing, Madame; perhaps he may never know. You must not speak so much, however; or, if so, pray use your native tongue. It is better, if consciousness does return, that the brain should be kept quite quiet. I think you had better retire to your room, Madame, and leave myself and Rachel to manage."

"Yes, yes, we can do very well, lady," assented old Rachel. "This is not a place for such as Madame, is it, Sir? If we could only get Mistress Forest, now; she is

first-rate at nursing ; she nursed me for three whole nights last winter, when I was most uncommon bad with the shivers, caught a-coming from Dalwynch in the spring-cart—and the cover on it, when it don't rain, is worse than nothing, for there's such a draught drives right through it——”

“ Yes, yes,” interrupted the doctor, impatiently ; “ you are quite right, Rachel. We'll send for Mistress Forest the first thing in the morning : she can easily be spared from the Abbey, now my lady's away.”

“ Ah, the more's the pity !” returned old Rachel. “ And this looks almost like a judgment, don't it, Sir, that this poor man, who was so rude to my dear mistress—or wanted to be, as I have heard—should have been carried in under her own roof here, feet foremost——”

“ Be silent, woman !” broke in Madame de Castellan, with severity. “ We have nothing to do with Lady Lisgard's affairs here. This house is my house for the present ; this wounded man is my guest.”

“ Speak French, speak French, Madame,” exclaimed the doctor, imploringly. “ Did you not hear me say so before ? You had much better return to bed.”

“ No, no,” returned Madame, in her native tongue ; “ I cannot do it. I will be prudent. I will be careful for the future ; but I cannot leave him, until, at all events, Mary Forest comes. Oh send her—send her, and let this woman go, whose presence is intolerable to me.”

Accordingly, in his visit to Belcomb about noon next day, the doctor brought Mistress Forest over with him, who was at once installed as Ralph Derrick's sick-nurse ; old Rachel being sent home to the lodge. No change had as yet taken place in the sufferer ; but the doctor's practised eye perceived that one was impending. This time, he made a long and earnest examination of his patient.

“ Will he live ?” asked Madame again, when he had finished, with the same earnestness, nay, even anguish as before.

"There is hope ; yes, I think there is hope," returned the doctor, cautiously.

"Thank God for that ; I thank Him for His great mercy !" ejaculated Madame with clasped hands and upturned eyes.

"Who is that ?" inquired a hoarse voice from the bed. The words were indistinct, and uttered with difficulty, but on every ear within that room they smote with the most keen significance. The two women turned deadly pale ; and even the doctor's finger shook as he placed it to his lips, in sign they should keep silent.

"Hush, my good friend," said he to the wounded man, whose eyes were now open wide, and staring straight before him : "you must not talk just now ; speaking is very bad for you."

"Who is that who was thanking God because there was hope of my life?" reiterated Ralph. "Neither man nor woman has any cause to do that, I'm sure ; while some have cause enough to pray that I were dead already, or at least had lost my wits. Doctor—for I suppose you are a doctor—have I lost my wits or not? Am I a sane man, or one not in my right mind ?"

"Hush, hush ; you are sane enough of course, except to keep on talking thus when I tell you that to speak is to do yourself the most serious harm."

"You hear him—all you in the room here," continued the sick man in a voice which, though low and feeble, had a sort of malignant triumph in it, which grated on the ear. "This doctor says I am quite sane. He says also that there is hope of my life—just a shadow of a hope. He is wrong there, for I shall die. But, anyhow, I lie in peril of death, and yet in my right mind. Therefore, what I say is to be credited—that, I believe, is the law ; and even the law is right sometimes. What I am about to say is truth—every word of it. I wish to make a statement.—No, I will take no medicines ; pen and ink, if I could only write, would be more welcome than the Elixir of Life, but I cannot." Here a groan was wrung from his

parched and bloodless lips. "Oh, Heaven! the pain I suffer; it is the foretaste of the hell for which I am bound!"

"Oh, Sir," ejaculated Mistress Forest, moving to the bedfoot, so as to show herself to his staring eyes, "think of heaven, not of hell. Ask for pardon of God, and not of revenge upon man."

"Ah, it is you, is it, good wench? I thought that no one else could have wished me well so piously a while ago. You did me an ill turn, although you did not mean to do so, when you let me out of the cage last night. Was it last night, or a week, or a month ago?"

"It was only last night," interposed the doctor, gravely. "Now, do not ask any more questions, or I shall have to forbid them being answered. It is my duty to tell you that with every word you speak your life is ebbing away."

"Then there is the less time to lose," answered Derrick, obstinately. "As for answering me, I do not want that. All I ask of you is, that you shall listen; and what I say, I charge you all, as a dying man, to remember—to repeat—to proclaim." Here he paused from weakness.—"Doctor," gasped he, "a glass of brandy—a large glass, for I am used to it. I *must* have it.—Good. I feel stronger now. Do you think, if you took down my words in writing, that I could manage"—here a shudder seemed to shake his poor bruised and broken frame, as though with the anticipation of torture—"to set down my name at the bottom of it?"

"No, my poor fellow—no. You could no more grasp a pen at present than you could rise and leave this house upon your feet. You must feel that yourself."

"I do—I do," groaned Ralph. "It is all the more necessary, then, that you should listen. My real name is not that one by which I have been known at Mirk. It is not Derrick, but Gavestone: the same name, good wench, by which your mistress went before she was married to Sir Robert Lisgard. But that was not her

maiden name—no, no. Do you not wonder why I tell you this? or did I speak of it last night, when I was mad with drink and rage?"

"You said something of the sort, Sir; but I knew it all before that. You are my lady's husband, and Sir Richard and the rest are all her bastard children—that is, in the eye of the law."

"You knew it, did you?" returned Ralph, after a pause. "You were in the plot with her against me, then? I am glad of that. I should be sorry to have left the world fooled to the last; for I thought that you at least were an honest wench, although all the world else were liars. So, after all, you knew it, did you? Well, at all events, it is news to the doctor here."

"No, Sir," returned the old gentleman, quietly applying some *Eau de Cologne* and water to the patient's brow; "I must confess I knew it also."

"And yet you told nobody!" ejaculated Ralph. "You suffered this imposture to go on unexposed!"

"I only heard of the facts you speak of—from Lady Lissard's own lips—two days ago at furthest," returned Dr. Haldane; "and I certainly told nobody, since the telling could do no good to any human being—not even to yourself, for instance, and would bring utter ruin and disgrace upon several worthy persons."

"Ha, ha!" chuckled the patient hoarsely; "you are right there. Disgrace upon that insolent Sir Richard, and on that ungrateful puppy, Master Walter."

"True," continued the doctor, gravely; "and upon Miss Letty, who is dear to all who know her, but dearest to the poor and friendless."

"I am sorry for her," said Derrick; "but I am not sorry for my lady—she that could look me in the face, and hear me tell the story of our early love, and of her own supposed death, to avert which I so gladly risked my life, and all without a touch of pity."

"No, Sir, with much pity," broke forth Mistress Forest. "I myself know that her heart bled for you. She never

loved Sir Robert as she did you, ungrateful man ! She loved you dead and alive ; she loves you now, although you pursue her with such cruel hate, and would bring shame upon all her innocent children."

"Ay, why not?" answered Ralph. "Have they not had their day, and is it not my turn at last? Who is the woman behind the curtains? Let her stand forth, that I may see her ; she, at least, is not a creature of 'my lady,' like you and the doctor here, and ready, for her sake, to hide the truth and perpetuate my wrongs. Let that woman stand forth, I say."





CHAPTER XXXIX.

DYING WORDS.

HUS adjured, Madame de Castellan stepped forward to the same position which Mary Forest had occupied at the foot of the bed: nowhere else could Ralph see her, for he was on his back just as they had first laid him, and could not turn his face a hair-breadth to left or right.

"Who *are* you?" asked he bluntly. "I do not remember having seen your face at Mirk."

"They call me Madame de Castellan," replied the old lady in good English, "and I live here at Belcomb by favour of Sir Richard Lisgard."

"Ah, you have reason, then, to be friends with him and his," returned the sick man bitterly. "You will none of you see me righted. Curse you all!"

"I will not see you wronged, if I can help it, Sir," replied the Frenchwoman solemnly, but keeping her eyes fixed always upon the floor.

"Will you not? Well, you have an honest face, I own; but faces are so deceptive! Mistress Forest's face yonder, for instance, is pleasant enough to look upon, but still she plays me false. Master Walter's again—why, he seems to have robbed an angel of his smile, and

yet he is base-hearted like the rest ; and, lastly, there was my Lucy—not mine now—no, no ; but what a sweet look was hers ! And there was guile and untruth for you ! But that is what I have to tell you. You have said you will not see me wronged, and I must believe you, since there is none else to trust to here. Besides, you are too old to lie ; you will be called to your own account too soon to dare to palter with a dying man. Yes, I am dying fast.—More brandy, doctor—brandy. Ah, that's life itself!—And yet, although you are so old, Madame, I dare say you remember your youthful days, when you were fair—for you *were* fair, I see—and courted. You were not without your lover, I warrant ? ”

“ I was loved, Sir,” returned Madame, in low but steadfast tones.

“ And did you marry the man you loved ? ”

“ I did, Sir. My husband was very dear to me, God knows, though we did not live long together.”

“ He died young, did he ? ”

“ Alas, yes, and I was left alone in the world without a friend or a home.”

“ His memory did not fade so quickly that you could love and marry another man at once, I suppose ? ”

“ His memory never faded,” replied the old lady gravely, “ for it has not faded now ; but after an interval of three years, I married another man.”

“ And loved him like the other ? ”

“ No, Sir ; there is only one true love—at least for a woman. But I was a dutiful wife for the second time ; and there were children born to me—three children—inexpressibly dear ; and when I lost their father, who loved me, though I could only give him grateful duty in return, I had something to live for still.”

Whether the grief-laden tone of Madame touched him, or the sad story she was telling, Ralph’s accents seemed to lose something of their bitterness when he again broke silence.

“ But if, lady, your first husband and true lover had,

by some wondrous chance, returned, as it might be, from the very grave, and you were satisfied that it was he indeed, and knew him, although he knew *you* not, and he was living a bad life among bad company, with no one in all the world to call him friend, would you not then have held your arms out to him, and cried : ‘Come back, come back !’ and told him how you had loved him all along ?”

“No, Sir ; not so. If I had been alone, like him, with only my own feelings to consult, I might, indeed, have so behaved ; for my heart would have yearned towards him, as it does, Heaven knows, even now. But, Sir, in such a case there would not only have been love to be obeyed, but duty. If this man were living the wild life you speak of, would he not have made a bad father to my poor children (left in my sole charge and guardianship by a just and noble man), an evil ruler of a well-ordered house, a bad example to all whom I would have had respect him ? Nay, worse, would not my acknowledgment of him — which I should otherwise be eager to make, and willing to take upon myself the shame that might accrue to *me* therefrom—would not that, I say, have brought disgrace on those who had earned it not—have made my own children, lawfully begotten, as I had thought, all bastards, and soiled the memory of an honest man, their father ?”

A long silence here ensued, broken only by the sick man’s painful breathing, and the sobs of Mistress Forest, who strove in vain to restrain her tears.

“I thank you, Madame,” said Ralph very feebly : “you have been pleading without knowing it for one who—— Do you see these tears ? I did not think to ever weep again. Either your gentle voice—reminding me of the very woman of whom I had meant to speak so harshly—or perhaps it is the near approach of death which numbs these fingers, that would else be clutching for their revenge—I know not ; but I now wish no one harm.—Doctor, you must feed this flame once more ; let

me but speak a very few words, and then I shall have no more use for life.—Mary, good wench, come here. You will shortly see again that mistress whom you love so well, and have so honestly served. Tell her—— Nay, don't cry; I do not need your tears to assure me that you feel for poor Ralph Gavestone—castaway though he be. I heard your ‘Thank God’ when the doctor said (though he was wrong there) that there was hope for me. Those were very honest words, Mary.”

“I did not say them!” ejaculated the waiting-maid earnestly. “Oh Madame, tell him who it was that said them.”

“It was *I*,” murmured Madame de Castellan, coming close to the bedside, and kneeling down there.

“You, lady! Why should you pray so earnestly that I might live, whose death would profit many, but whose recovery none?”

“Because I have wronged you, Ralph. Yes, *Ralph!* You know me now. Do not ask to see my patched and painted face again, because it is not mine, but listen to my voice, which you remember. I am your own wife, Lucy, and I love you, husband mine.”

“She loves me still,” murmured the dying man: “she owns herself my wife, thank God, thank God!” The tears rolled down his cheeks, and over his rough and ghastly face a mellow softness stole, like the last gleam of sunset upon a rocky hill. Dr. Haldane rose and noiselessly left the room, beckoning Mary to follow. The dying husband and his wife were left to hold their last interview alone.

“What I have been telling you, Ralph, as the history of another, is my own. I have never forgotten you. I have loved you all along. Forgive me, if I seem to have sacrificed you to—to those it was my duty to shield from shame. I could not bear to see disgrace fall upon my children, and so I fled from them, in hopes to save them from it. And yet I loved them so that I could not altogether leave them, but took this cottage in another

name, and under this disguise, in order to be near them.* Oh lover, husband, who saved my life at peril of his own, a mother's heart was my excuse—be generous and noble as of old—for give me!"

"Forgive you!" gasped the sick man: "nay, forgive me! How could I ever have sought to do you wrong! My own dear Lucy!" In an instant she had plucked away so much of her disguise as was about her face and head, and was leaning over him with loving eyes.

"How many years ago, wife, is it since you kissed me last?" murmured the dying man. "My outward sight is growing very dim; I do not recognise my Lucy's face, although I know 'tis she; but I see her quite clearly sitting in the cottage-porch beside the shining river. How it roars among the rounded stones, and how swiftly it is running to the sea! Round my neck, love, you will presently find the little locket with that dead sprig of fuchsia in it which you gave me when we plighted troth. Let that be buried with me; I have had no love or care for sacred things, but perhaps—— They say that God is very merciful; and since He sees into our inmost thoughts, He will know with what reverence I held that simple gift, because it was your own, and you were His. I loved you most, I swear, because you were so pure and good, Lucy. Ah me! I wonder, in the world to come, if I or *he*——"

A piercing cry broke from my lady's lips. "Spare me, Ralph—spare me!"

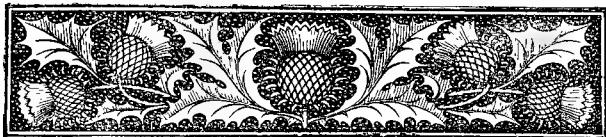
"Yes, yes. It was done for the best, I know. Don't fret, dear heart. Of course you thought me dead. For certain, I am dying now—fast, fast. Thank God for

* The author having been informed by a critical friend that he has exposed himself to the charge of plagiarism, by representing Lady Lisgard as thus assuming the character of another person, begs to state—first, that he has never had the opportunity of reading the powerful novel, *East Lynn* (wherein, as he understands, a similar device is employed); and secondly, that the idea of the metamorphosis is taken from a short story (written by himself) which was published in *Chambers's Journal*, under the title of "Change for Gold," so long ago as 1854.

that ! It would have been a woeful thing, having thus found my own, to have left her straightway, and taken my lone way through the world again, knowing the thing I know. But I would have done it, never fear. Are you sure of those two, Lucy—that were here a while ago —quite sure ? My dying curse upon them, if they breathe to human ear our sacred secret ! They love you ? That is well. I would have all the world to love you ; and may all those you love repay that priceless gift with tender duty.” Here he paused, as if to gather together his little remaining strength ; and when he spoke again, it was with a voice so low that my lady had to place her ear quite close to his pale lips to catch his words. But she did hear them, everyone. “The prayers of a man like me may avail nothing, Lucy, but at least they can do no harm. God bless Sir Richard—yes, yes ! God bless Master Walter’s handsome face ! God bless Miss Letty ! That’s what I said on Christmas-eve with Steve and the rest of them, not knowing whom I spoke of, and I say it now, for are they not my Lucy’s dear ones ? God bless *you*, my dear wife. Kiss—kiss.”

Those were the last words of wild Ralph Gavestone. When the doctor and Mistress Forest re-entered that silent room, my lady was upon her knees beside the pillow ; she had closed the dead man’s eyes, and folded his palms together, and taken from his neck the locket, but to be returned to him by a trusty hand when the time came.





CHAPTER XL.

AND LAST

SF there had happened to be anyone upon whom poor Ralph's wild talk, on the night of the Abbey festivities, had made any serious impression whatever, it was destined to be removed by the inquest that followed upon his death. The very words he had made use of in his fury, his calling my lady his wife, and stigmatising Sir Richard as her natural son, would have been held to be no slight evidence of his insanity, which, however, was abundantly proved by other testimony. The waiter at the *Royal Marine* at Coveton came in all good faith to take his solemn oath that, to the best of his judgment, the gent. with the beard, who had scandalised that respectable house by taking brandy for breakfast, was like no other man alive as he had ever served; or, in other words, was nothing short of a lunatic. The postboys whom he had commanded to stop and let him out before his chaise could be whirled over the first stage, pronounced him mad. The porter at the railway station, to whose civil inquiry as to whither he was going the angry man had returned so uncivil an answer, came to the same conclusion. No man nearer home, from the lord-lieutenant to the parish constable, and (even of his whilom companions) from Captain Walter Lisgard to landlord Steve, but gave it as his opinion that the man was mad. And the verdict of

the coroner's jury being in accordance with the evidence, decided that the deceased had met with his death in the manner with which we are acquainted during an attack of temporary insanity, induced by drink.

The nerves of Madame de Castellan had received much too great a shock, from recent occurrences, to permit her presence at the inquest; and, indeed, such an effect did they take upon her, that she left not only Belcomb but England itself almost immediately, declining with many thanks Sir Richard's offer—notwithstanding that Letty drove over in person to make it known to her—that she should take up her residence for the present at the Abbey itself. So Madame went back again to her native land as suddenly and almost as mysteriously as she had come; and after a while, wrote to inform her English friends that the domestic disagreements which had driven her from home were in a fair way to be healed, and that it was very unlikely that she should have to trespass upon their kindness any more.

The real history of that lady's coming to Belcomb was never absolutely known to more than two persons, and perhaps more or less rightly guessed at by a third. From the moment that my lady recognised her first husband in Ralph Derrick, she never concealed from herself the possibility of her having to leave the Abbey, and become perhaps a lifelong exile from home and friends for her three children's sakes, but especially for that of Sir Richard. Perhaps she exaggerated the depth to which family pride had taken root in the heart of her eldest son; but she honestly believed that the knowledge of his being illegitimate would have killed him. Although she could never have possessed the strength of mind, even had she enjoyed the requisite want of principle, to deny in person Ralph's claim to her as her lawful husband, she justly argued that he would be utterly unable to establish his case in her absence. He could summons no witness whose testimony would go half so far as her own tell-tale face; while his own character

was such, that no credence would be given to his statement, unless supported by strong and direct evidence. Thus situated, my lady turned over in her mind scheme after scheme of flight, without hitting upon anything that gave much promise, and all of which entailed a residence abroad, cruelly far from those dear ones from whom she was about, with such a heavy heart, to flee for their own good; but when she had, perforce, as we have seen, to take Mistress Forest into her confidence, something arose out of a conversation between them concerning their old life together at Dijon, which suggested that ingenious artifice which she eventually put into effect. Madame de Castellan had been dead some years, though of that circumstance my lady's children were unaware, albeit Sir Richard had heard a good deal of her when a boy, and had even some dim recollection of her personal appearance when she was a guest of his father and mother at the Abbey.

Of this remembrance, my lady took advantage. Mary and herself in that old school-time at Dijon had been used to act charades at Madame's house, and that circumstance no doubt put into Lady Lisgard's mind the idea of personating the old Frenchwoman herself. My lady had learned from those amateur performances the secrets of "green-room" metamorphosis;* she was naturally endowed with no small power of mimicry; and she could speak French like a native. Supposing that the desired transformation could be effected, what securer plan, and one more unlikely to be suspected, could be found than that secluded cottage of Belcomb, so close to the Abbey, and whither all news relating to her children could be brought to her at once through Mary, who, it was arranged, should be transferred to Madame's service in the manner that was afterwards actually adopted. The letter purporting to come from Dijon and taken by Sir Richard's own hand from the post-

* How a few strips of black plaster on the teeth can counterfeit age and toothlessness, let any of our fair readers experiment for themselves,

bag, had been placed therein by Mary Forest, who had used her mistress's key at an earlier hour, and found that communication from Arthur Haldane concerning Ralph's departure for Coveton, which necessitated such immediate action on the part of my lady. There was not one day to be lost in making her preparations, and indeed from that time she had been ready to start at a moment's notice, though, as it happened, there was no need for such urgent haste. The counterfeit visit in person to the Abbey was of course running a considerable risk, but the establishment of the fact of Madame de Castellan's arrival at Belcomb, my lady had rightly judged to be of paramount importance ; indeed, that being effected, it is doubtful, even if the unhappy Ralph had not met with so sudden an end, whether any suspicion of Madame and my lady being one and the same person would have ever existed. The most difficult matter connected with my lady's flight was in truth, after all, to find a reason for it sufficient to satisfy the minds of those she left behind her. The children would have been slow to believe that she could bring herself to leave home and them, simply because her two boys did not get on well together, for in that case, absentee mothers should be considerably more common than they are. But, fortunately, not only did the flame of discord between Sir Richard and Master Walter continue to burn, but received plenty of unexpected fuel, such as at any other time would have caused my lady unutterable woe, but which, under present circumstances, were almost welcome to her. Walter's clandestine marriage with the very girl to whom his brother had offered his own hand, was an incident so painful as to give my lady excuse for almost anything ; but Walter had left the Abbey, and it was important that he should return thither and make things unpleasant, as he could not fail to do by the mere fact of his presence there with Rose. Sir Richard, with his *fête* in view, was easily persuaded to ask the new-married couple down, and all things

worked together for ill, which for once was my lady's "good."

Then, again, Walter's debts—of the full extent of which, however, his mother was never informed—gave her an additional cause of serious dissatisfaction ; and lastly, Sir Richard's opposition to Letty's marriage with Arthur Haldane, made up a very respectable bill of indictment. At all events, as we have seen, it was acknowledged so to be by the parties against whom it had been filed. The consciences of both Sir Richard and Walter were really pricked ; and, besides, there was the painful fact of their mother's departure from her own roof, owing to their conduct, whether it justified such an extreme measure upon her part or not. Moreover, the delegate to whom my lady had committed the disclosure of her motives, had been well chosen. It was necessary that a third person should be admitted to the knowledge of my lady's secret, in order that her affairs might be transacted during an absence which might be prolonged for years, or even for a lifetime ; and where could she find so tried and trustworthy a friend as Dr. Haldane ? The fact, too, of his visiting the Abbey in person, after an interval of so many years, and even after his so recent refusal to be present on the all-important occasion of Sir Richard's coming of age, gave additional weight to the mission upon which he came. It brought about, as has been shown, a genuine reconciliation between the brothers, and even exacted from them a solemn promise that their disagreements should henceforth cease. Nor was it destined that the good doctor's friendly offices should cease with this. When the day came to lay Ralph Derrick's body in its coffin, the old philosopher—nay, cynic, as many held him to be—placed very reverently with his own hands that little locket around the dead man's neck, which he had treasured as the most precious thing he owned for more than half a lifetime. And on the morrow, when they buried him in Dalwynch churchyard, the doctor followed

him to the grave, not only as the “deceased’s medical attendant,” but as his chief and only mourner, with a tender pity for the world-battered and passionate man, who had thus found rest at last. He stood beside the round black mound, when all had departed, with that wise, sad smile upon his face, which he always wore when he was thinking deepest, and though “Poor fellow, poor fellow!” was all he said, it was a more pregnant epitaph than is often to be read on tombstones.

After a little, the good news came to Mirk from France, that my lady, trusting to what she had heard from her old friend, was coming home again. The only stipulation she made was, that her withdrawal from the Abbey was not to be alluded to by any of her family, for which, indeed, added she, there would be less necessity, since the principal cause of it—the ill-feeling between her sons—no longer, as she was delighted to understand, existed. Of course, Lady Lisgard could not prevent “the county” from canvassing the matter, any more than she could have forbidden a general election; and, in truth, her affairs were almost as much talked about as politics after a dissolution of parliament. She and her sons had each their partisans, who argued for their respective clients often with great enthusiasm, and sometimes with an ingenuity worthy of better premises. But it was the general opinion that Master Walter’s marriage was at the bottom of the whole business, and that that designing woman, Rose Aynton, had sown dissension in what had once been one of the best-conducted and most united families in Wheatshire.

An account of the inquest in the local journals, a paragraph in the *Times*, headed “Curious Catastrophe,” and an allusion to Don Quixote’s adventure *apropos* of the homicidal windmill, in a comic print, exhausted the subject of Ralph Derrick’s death.

But my lady returned to Mirk Abbey in deep mourning, it was understood in consequence of the sudden

death of Madame de Castellan, which occurred, singularly enough, almost immediately after her leaving Belcomb.

It was thought very unfortunate that the two old friends should thus have never been permitted to meet. Madame's demise, however, of course left Mary Forest free to rejoin her former mistress, in whose company, indeed, she returned to Mirk.

We have said that besides the two persons in possession of my lady's secret, there was a third who had his shrewd suspicions. But if Arthur Haldane's legal training had really enabled him to come to the right conclusion in the matter, it also judiciously restrained him from saying anything about it.

He had never cause to use that memorandum which we saw him set down in his pocket-book of Miss Letty's opinion. "It seems to me that people should be taken for what they *are*, let their birth be what it will;" but we believe that it was not without a reason that he committed it to paper. Although entirely without ancestral pride, and with a very hearty contempt for any such folly, as matters stood, Letty was just the sort of girl who, upon finding herself illegitimate, would have refused to carry out her engagement, from the apprehension of attaching disgrace to the man she loved; and therefore Arthur thought it well to record her own argument against herself, in case any such occasion should arise. Not many months elapsed, however, before this possible obstruction was removed, in the pleasantest manner, by the union of these two young people: and a happier or better assorted couple it is not my fortune to know.

Sir Richard remains a bachelor, although as staid and decorous in his conduct as any married man; even more so than some, it is whispered—but then, who can seriously blame charming Master Walter? The cause of the young baronet's celibacy is strenuously held by many to be Miss Rose Aynton's rejection of him long

ago, for *that* has oozed out, somehow or other, divulged perhaps by the young woman herself in some moment when her vanity for once overcame her prudence; but at all events, Sir Richard has acted very generously towards his brother's wife (that's how these gossips put it), and her husband Captain Lisgard's debts have been settled, and he has been entirely "set up" with respect to his pecuniary affairs; and, moreover, he runs no risk of being again embarrassed. If it is really true that he occasionally forgets that abrupt ceremony which took place between himself and Rose at the register office (and somehow the thing does not recur to the memory with such force under those circumstances as when one is married in the usual way by the combined endeavours of several clergymen), and indulges in little flirtations, he has at least forsaken both the turf and the gaming-table. We do not say that he is given up entirely to his military duties, but he is in the enjoyment of an excellent staff appointment, and possesses the fullest confidence both of his commanding officer and of that functionary's wife; which latter, we all know, is essential to the position of an aide-de-camp. But the fact is, that almost everybody likes Master Walter, and will continue to do so (although perhaps somewhat less as he grows older) to his dying day. And why not?

Dieu l'a jugé. Silence, sings a true poet upon the death of the first Napoleon: *Que des faibles mortels la main n'y touche plus! Qui peut sonder, Seigneur, ta clémence infinie? ET VOUS, FLEAU DE DIEU, QUI SAIT SI LE GENIE N'EST PAS UNE DE VOS VERTUS?* And what has thus been greatly written of genius, may also surely be said in a less sense of what we call (for lack of a better word) manner. England has lately followed to his grave with weeping eyes, a statesman—both honest, indeed, and able—but whose chief claim to her affection rested upon this comparatively humble gift, so precious because so rare. When combined with youth and personal graces, as in Walter Lisgard's case, it is well-nigh irresistible,

and has always been so from the days of Plato and Xenophon. Too often worthless in themselves, or rendered so by being “spoilt” by all who meet them ; not seldom empty-headed, or with heads turned by conceit and flattery ; and almost always destitute of reverence for sacred things, whether divine or human—natural or doctrinal—we yet prefer the company of those thus dowered to that of the wise, the witty, or the good. Their smile is a pleasure ; their very presence is a harmony ; and prayerless themselves, they evoke the supplications of the pure in their behalf.

Even Rose herself continues to be to some extent infatuated with Master Walter—although he is her own husband—a feat surely far more difficult of accomplishment than for the *vâlet de chambre* of a hero to believe in his master’s reputation. At all events, it is beyond question that she grows very jealous of the captain. Master Walter has never been jealous of *her*; not, indeed, that he has had any serious reason to be so, but because such a baleful sentiment is never allowed to enter his well contented mind. He is thoroughly persuaded that if his wife loves anybody else in the world beside herself—that that person is her husband ; and he is right. He, too, has a genuine affection for one other individual beside Captain Walter Lisgard ; and this is for his mother. We all know that she returns it seventyfold.

My lady lives a tranquil and not unhappy life in her old home with dutiful Sir Richard, very pleasantly diversified by frequent visits from dear Letty and her husband—their last advent being a particularly grateful one, since they brought with them a little stranger, aged six weeks, whom it was always a matter of difficulty to extricate from grandmamma’s loving arms. But my lady’s whitest days are those rare ones which her darling Walter finds it possible—so pressing are his military duties—to spend at somewhat sombre Mirk. Then she is happy ; then she is almost her old self as we first knew her, before those deep tones, speaking from the grave, upon Mirk

Abbey lawn at Christmas-time, broke in upon her calm harmonious days. Master Walter has no child. This troubles her sometimes; but at others she feels very thankful for it; for if he had a son, or should Sir Richard marry and beget one, would not a certain, however venial, imposition be perpetuated in the descent of the title? Even now, when no great harm seems done, my lady's conscience is not altogether at ease; nay, once, so disturbed it grew, that she took secret counsel on the matter with Dr. Haldane.

"Dear lady," said he, "if any human being could be bettered by the disclosure you hint at, or any human being was wronged by your reticence, I should be the first to say: "Tell all;" but as things stand, it would, in my opinion, not only be Quixotic, but downright madness to disentomb that woeful secret, which lies buried in Ralph Gavestone's grave. Moreover, I understood it was his dying wish that his story should remain untold."

This last observation, delivered with great simplicity, was the best remedy for my lady's troubled mind that the good doctor could have prescribed. But when this moral patient of his had left his consulting-room quite cured, the radical philosopher permitted himself a congratulatory chuckle. "Gad," said he (he used the interjections of half a century ago), "it is lucky my lady questioned me no further. *My* difficulty lies in permitting a person of title more than there need be in this misgoverned country. If the Lisgards had a peerage in their family, I should think it my duty to explode the whole concern. But I don't suppose one baronet more than there is any necessity to suffer, *can do much harm.*"

So Sir Richard Lisgard, little dreaming upon how unsatisfactory a tenure it is held, keeps his title unmolested; and "my lady" (Heaven bless her!) is still the honoured mistress of MIRK ABBEY.

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